

## CHAPTER XV

### A Hectoring Chief

Curzon had lofty ideas about the civilians in India, the guardians of the Raj. He had declared:

The keys of India are not in England, nor in the House of Commons. They are in the office desk of every Civilian in this country. He by his character and conduct, is insensibly, but materially, contributing to the future maintenance or collapse, of the British dominion in India. If he is like the men who went before him, if he is keen about his work, has a high sense of duty, and is interested in, and likes the people, our position will be secure for a century to come. If he is indifferent, or incompetent, or slack, if he dislikes the country and the people, and has no taste for work then the great structure<sup>1</sup> of which we are all so proud will one day break down.

Since the Mutiny the administrative machinery in India had lost its pioneering zeal, and the civilians, though on the whole diligent and incorruptible, had felt the best way to govern India was to do the minimum mechanical task. Within two months of his arrival in India, Curzon was reporting with

<sup>1</sup> Curzon to Hamilton, May 21, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

horror, "In the public Library, I found pigeons flying about and dropping their dirt on tables and chairs, because no one would think of arresting so well-established and consecrated a habit."<sup>1</sup> He despaired at the "gigantic quagmire or bog, into which every question that comes along either sinks or is sucked down; and unless you stick a peg with a label over the spot at which it disappeared, and from time to time go around and dig out the relics, you will never see anything of them again."<sup>2</sup>

Curzon had taken on the task of overhauling the administrative machinery. But alas! he could not bring himself to parcel out the work to his subordinates. He scolded them for apathy and took on the workload on his shoulders. When Hamilton, the Secretary of State for India, cautioned that he must not unduly tire himself out performing labours which could well be done by subordinates, Curzon grumbled:

I must thank you for the constant and friendly insistence with which you press me not to overwork. But when you urge me to delegate more to my subordinates, I confess I think you hardly realise how quickly such a proceeding on my part would bring the whole machine on a standstill... I tell you it is perfectly useless. The Government of India is<sup>3</sup> a mighty and miraculous machine for doing nothing.

Senior civil servants were infuriated, interpreting the Viceroy's refusal to delegate work as an insult to their

<sup>1</sup> Curzon to Godley, Feb.23, 1899, CP. Vol.158.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon to Hamilton, May 3, 1899, CP. Vol.158.

<sup>3</sup> Curzon to Hamilton, April 9, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

competence. They felt that the superior Viceroy was so conscious of the inferiority of others that he had to do everything himself. The Viceroy slogged fourteen hours a day. He wrote his own speeches. He drafted Bills. He wrote lengthy letters in his own hand. He oversaw the family expenditure. Mary wrote to her parents, "Even here George helps and sees to all accounts and works like a slave; it is no use begging him to work less as he will work till he kills himself in spite of all the begging not to in the world."<sup>1</sup> The Viceroy hired and inspected servants and even took time off to catch a thieving Government House cook! He triumphantly wrote to a friend in England, "We caught him red-handed. He returned 598 chickens as having been consumed within a single month. We went to the tradesman who had the contract and found the figures were 290."<sup>2</sup> Curzon's Private Secretary Sir Walter Lawrence observed:

It is all strange to officialdom to have a Viceroy young, resolute and hardworking. He can beat them all at work, is always sure of his facts. But they dislike his frank<sub>3</sub> criticism and resent any criticism as interference.

The refusal to delegate responsibility widened the chasm between the Viceroy and his staff. His subordinates felt their Chief considered them inadequate and watched

<sup>1</sup> Mary Curzon to her parents, June 15, [1899], MCP.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon to Sir Schomberg Macdonnell, July 25, 1900, CP. Vol.14.  
Hon.(Sir) 'Pom' Schomberg Macdonnell (1861-1915), Private Secretary to Lord Salisbury for fourteen years.

<sup>3</sup> Sir W. Lawrence, Diary 1901, WLP. Vol.26.

him with sullen aloofness. This only drove Curzon to work harder and get more irritable. Thus the vicious cycle grew.

In fact this inability to delegate to others and the fussy preoccupation with detail was an attitude in marked variance with that generally associated with people belonging to Curzon's class. As noted earlier, Margot Asquith had branded it as Curzon's "middle class method".<sup>1</sup> In fact Curzon was influenced by the pecuniary restraints of his childhood. Lord Scarsdale having come unexpectedly into his inheritance had never been able to live with the easy abandon of an aristocrat. Some of his insecurity may have rubbed off on his son. Curzon's daughter Irene wrote in her autobiography, "My father engaged his first valet when he was twenty-seven years old, and was worried at the wages he might have to pay."<sup>2</sup> No doubt, this watching for the smallest items of daily expenditure accounted for his habitual carefulness throughout his life.

It is significant to remember that Curzon's grandfather was only the seventh son of the 2nd Baron Lord Scarsdale and had it not been for the illegitimacy of his older five brothers Curzon may have remained an ordinary country gentleman. That is why Curzon always believed in his destiny which he felt had brought him into his inheritance. He tried to maintain a carefully calculated patrician style, but beneath

<sup>1</sup> Margot Asquith, The Autobiography of Margot Asquith (London, 1920), p.175.

<sup>2</sup> Baroness Ravensdale, Little Innocents, Childhood Reminiscences (London, 1932), p.11.

the surface remained a busy bourgeois. Even as Viceroy he exhausted himself attending to redundant details.

Similarly the Viceroy could be petty. A man with his stately manner may have been expected to be endowed with an aristocratic mind. But his quarrel with Lieutenant-Governor Sir Mackworth Young shows that he was not capable of a gracious disposition. Curzon's creation of a new North-West Frontier Province from the existing Province of Punjab had trod badly on the toes of Sir Mackworth. Curzon had failed to take the Governor into confidence. The nettled Sir Mackworth had, as a consequence, said bitter things about the Viceroy at the Masonic Lodge dinner at Simla. He had subsequently apologised and tried to make amends by issuing an invitation to the Viceroy. Had Curzon been able to show magnanimity in forgiving the Youngs, he would have come out with his prestige high. Alas! he could not bring himself to do so. He reported to Mary:

The Youngs had their first ball on Monday. Neither I nor Lawrence nor Baring went. You need not be afraid darling of my showing insufficient dignity in the matter. I accepted the apology because I had no other alternative, & because otherwise M.Y. would have had to resign, & then there would have been a fine hullabaloo in the Indian & English press. I should have emerged from it all right but it would have been a troublesome episode & I should never have been able to tell the truth of the case. Also it would have converted M.Y. whom everybody without exception has condemned into a martyr with whom everybody sympathised. It was despicable therefore to make it up outwardly. But I have never spoken to him or to her since, and I shall never enter their house again. Would you believe it that woman - whose continued abuse of me is the talk of Simla - had the effrontery

to come up again a few days ago (after I had refused both her dances) with a renewed invitation to dinner? In reply I need hardly say the Viceroy regretted that he could not add to the number of his engagements. I should hope they see it now.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Mackworth appealed to the Viceroy to accept the invitation, even sending a copy of a letter Lady Young was supposed to have written to the Viceroy. It came closest to an apology: "I can't help noticing that throughout this season Your Excellency has entirely withdrawn the sunshine of your favour from me and naturally I am sad about it."<sup>2</sup>

Sir Mackworth felt deeply the Viceregal spurning of his wife's invitation: "Any slight shown to her cannot be kept secret but becomes public property, detracts from the Lieutenant Governor's social position and causes a deplorable scandal in a society where the Viceroy counts for so much." He pleaded with the Viceroy to resume social relations, "as the King's representative and as a gentleman, in the name of justice and chivalry..."<sup>3</sup> Here was an olive branch and Curzon as Viceroy should have relented. The Youngs had been tactless and offensive but he had done much to upset them. He should have treated them with the magnanimity befitting a Chief.

T. Raleigh, member of the Viceroy's Council, wrote

<sup>1</sup> Curzon to Mary, Aug.17, 1901, MCP.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Young to Curzon, Sept.30, 1901, CP. Vol.230.

<sup>3</sup> Young to Curzon, Sept.30, 1901, CP. Vol.230.

to him:

I have no right to offer advice to H.E. except on this ground, that it will, in my opinion, be a public misfortune if Sir Mackworth, leaves Simla for the last time, after 40 years of service, without any friendly notice from the Viceroy. And may I perhaps be allowed to say that, as far as my knowledge goes, I don't think H.E. would suffer any loss of dignity by accepting an invitation at this moment. It would be understood in Simla that the reconciliation is more or less formal and the Viceroy's reason for agreeing to it is the public reasons which I have indicated.<sup>1</sup>

It was good advice and Curzon should have taken it. But as usual he did not. Only when a few months later Sir Mackworth was retiring that Curzon penned him a letter: "As Head of Government of India, I should not like you to leave this country as you shortly will, without writing you a parting word of grateful recognition..."<sup>2</sup> But the damage had been done. Sir Mackworth Young's pointed reply was; "I must remind you that you have thought fit to treat me with marked discourtesy on a charge the evidence for which you will not disclose,... that I have appealed to you as the King's representative, and as a gentleman, to make the required amends, but without avail; and while matters stand thus between us, I am unable to accept with any satisfaction Your Excellency's appreciation of my humble services."<sup>3</sup> Curzon's peevishness was never forgiven.

<sup>1</sup> Raleigh to Curzon, Sept.22, 1901, CP. Vol.230.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon to Young, Feb.21, 1902, CP.Vol.230.

<sup>3</sup> Young to Curzon, Feb.27, 1902, CP.Vol.230.

"They call him imperial George," lamented Sir Walter Lawrence, "a common story served in England is that the Consort has to curtesy in the morning."<sup>1</sup> Stories had begun spreading about Curzon's autocratic and exacting ways. He was made out to be an ogre and a man impossible to please. Curzon was not unaware of them. He told Mary, "Geo[rge] Hamilton wrote to me and said it was a favourite story of the King's: it is said that old Sandbags [Military Secretary Colonel Sandbach] left us because I ordered him to stand behind my chair at luncheon and dinner and he could not stomach the indignity."<sup>2</sup> But as in the past he thought it beneath his dignity to refute the rumours. Brodrick, his old friend who was later to become Secretary of State for India, had warned Curzon early in his career to guard against resentment. His warning was most friendly and full of solicitude for Curzon:

My dear old boy, I have been meaning for a long time to write you a special letter, and have put it off. And now I shall take the plunge because I don't want to feel a humbug any longer. You and I always have been very open with each other, and when I write or think of your Indian career and the great work you are carrying out, I cannot justify to myself not making a clean breast of what I hear... Once or twice you have alluded to the unpopularity your reforms are causing you in certain quarters, and the lies as to your social proceedings which find their way into the English Press. You are now still only one-third through your time, you have big schemes on hand,

<sup>1</sup> Sir W. Lawrence, Diary 1901, WLP. Vol.26.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon to Mary, July 24, 1901, MCP.

and I can't bear the thought that you are in any avoidable way handicapped. What I am going to say is told to no one else. You can take it or leave it, but you will not, I trust, mistake it. Briefly - I gather you are raising against yourself an undue amount of opposition, on grounds more personal than political. You drive some hard and they resent it. You rebuke others and they cannot turn. You ignore a few and their mulishness reacts on others. You and Mary started in excelsis. We have got a young god and goddess come to rule us. There was bound to be a reaction. But surely, making every allowance for misquotation of your words and mis-statements as to your actions, you ought, with your great hospitality and personal charms, to enjoy more popularity than you do.

You cannot run so vast a business as India off your own bat. Physical strength can do only a certain amount. I can't bear to think of you for three years, with health needing care, pulling double against a sulky staff. What do I suggest? Merely this. Everyone respects your powers of work, your insight, your decision, your courage. They fear you, I am told. You have therefore an asset on which to play. Why not smooth everything for a bit? People will be the more grateful, if they are a little sore just now.

I say nothing of the social part as I have not an atom of confidence in what I hear, but I shall not believe you and Mary could come away from India without being loved. I mention no names - surely it is best - but my informants are very diverse and in every case but one friendly to you both. I know by the bitter experience how one gets when one is working to death and others are torpid, more especially when it is hot and one is short of sleep. You must remember that, apart from personal affection, a stake all we younger men have in your career. In our political generation only three young men have been really tried. Rosebery as P.M. at 46, Randolph as C. of Excheq. [Chancellor of the Exchequer] at 37 (I don't count Asquith, because Gladstone had no choice), and you are the third. At this moment, if you were unlucky enough to break down, I believe they would go back to the middle-aged and mediocrity.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brodrick to Curzon, Sept.9, 1900, CP. Vol.10.

Perhaps Curzon's colleagues in India might have understood him and been inspired by him better had he tried to grow closer to them by occasionally sharing his fears and hopes. Few, for instance, knew that Curzon's stiff gait which lent such an awful majesty to his presence was the result of the leather and steel harness. As he wrote to his father:

The fact is my back is a handicap to me such as no one can possibly realise. I always have to wear these vile stays which make me stream with perspiration when everybody else is quite cool. I am constantly in discomfort and sometimes in pain when I have to appear entirely at ease. No one who saw my back... would think it possible for me to do one tenth of what I do. I do it now, because I never can feel sure that in 10 or 15 years time after I have returned to England - or earlier - I shall be good for anything. I never breathe this to a soul.<sup>1</sup>

Had he, however, disclosed all this to his subordinates they might have tolerated his bouts of rage as a human failing. He was lonely in his eminence, isolated by his position, if not by his own nature, and had no one except his wife to whom he could confide his fears, anxieties and hopes. To everyone he was the Viceroy and an exacting master. This knowledge frightened people into being less than what they were. Unlike Winston Churchill few were allowed to see the man behind the mask:

The contradictory qualities which dwell in the characters of so many individuals can rarely have formed more vivid contrasts than in George Curzon. The world thought him pompous in manner and in mind. But this widespread and

<sup>1</sup> Curzon to Lord Scarsdale, April 2, 1901, CA.266/1-3.

deep impression... was immediately destroyed by the Curzon one met in a small circle of intimate friends and equals ... Here one saw the charming, gay companion adorning every subject that he touched with his agile wit, ever ready to laugh at himself, ever capable of conveying sympathy and understanding. It seemed incredible that his warm heart and jolly boyish nature should be so effectually concealed from the vast majority of those he met and with whom he worked.

Few really knew of the pain that racked him, robbing him of sleep at night and turning him into a cantankerous chief by day. Unaware of his ordeal, they ascribed his impatience to a viceregal disdain for lesser mortals. Anxious to retain his image of a 'superior person' Curzon for his part did nothing to dispute the myth. On the contrary, he felt that he must retain that aura of distant eminence at all times. He projected before all those he worked with the image of a lofty and arrogant man. He took an overwhelming workload which took its toll on his back but he could look around at his Indian empire and feel at last he was fulfilling the role in life for which he had convinced himself he was predestined.

<sup>1</sup> Sir W. Churchill, Great Contemporaries (London, 1937), pp.277-8.