

CHAPTER II

Kedleston Hall

It is said that Kedleston gave Curzon his lofty view of life and his sense of destiny. By a strange coincidence, the Viceregal residence in Calcutta was designed on a model of Kedleston and Curzon first saw it as a 28-year old Tory M.P. when he visited India. Upon his appointment to the Viceroyalty Curzon was to remark :

It is certainly true that it was the fact of that resemblance that first turned my thoughts to the question of the Government of India; and when I left the doors of Government House in Calcutta on the first and the only occasion on which I have visited it, in 1887, it made me feel that some day, if fate were propitious and I were held deserving of the task I should like to exchange Kedleston in England for Kedleston in India.¹

Actually, Curzon's father, Alfred Nathaniel, being the younger son of a younger son had reconciled himself to the

¹ Derby, Nov.5, 1898, Indian Speeches 4 Vols. (Calcutta, 1900-6), Vol.I, p.XX.

rectorship of the family parish at Kedleston. The Scarsdale family had long and continuous connections with the Church.¹ The little medieval chapel at Kedleston crouched behind the manor house and in the church graveyard the tombs were only those belonging to the family or their entourage. The parishioners were the 550 tenants of Kedleston. Alfred Nathaniel was happy with the bucolic tenor of a parsonage. Within a year of his rectorship in July 1856 he married the 19-year-old Blanche Senhouse. Her father Joseph Pocklington Senhouse of Netherhall belonged to the landed gentry and not the peerage.² Marriage customs among the British landed classes were such that the bride was expected to bring as dowry a sum of cash, called a 'portion'. In return the head of the household was expected to guarantee the bride an annuity called a 'jointure', if she survived her husband as a widow. The result of this was that unless the younger son had made his own fortune, he was rarely able to attract a wealthy bride. In 1856, Alfred Nathaniel became the 4th Baron Scarsdale of Kedleston Hall. The unexpected death of his older brother in 1855 had put him directly in line to the succession. Curzon as their eldest son would automatically inherit both the barony and the prized ancestral seat.

The lusty bohemian 2nd Baron had created complications for the family. On coming of age, he had, as behoving the

¹ All information on the family history and Kedleston Hall is drawn from interviews with 3rd Viscount Scarsdale; Curzon's Kedleston Church (Privately printed, London, 1922) and Reminiscences by Curzon of his Early Life, CA. 75.

² John Burke, Dictionary of the Landed Gentry (London, 1843).

family tradition, married an English girl and produced a son who succeeded him as the 3rd Baron upon his death in 1837. The 3rd Baron however remained a bachelor and in the normal course of affairs the title would pass to his next brother. But here arose the problem created by his father, the 2nd Baron. After the death of his first wife, Sophia Noel, in 1782 the 2nd Baron fled to Europe to escape the clutches of money-lenders for gambling debts. There he fell in love with a Flemish girl, Felicite Anne Josephe de Wattines, and fathered six illegitimate children by her, before marrying her in 1798. The ceremony took place in Altona near Hamburg. Four more children were born to Lord and Lady Scarsdale after the marriage and being born in wedlock were not debarred from succession. Curzon's grandfather was the first legitimate son born to the second Lady Scarsdale, though he was actually her sixth son. The fact of his legitimacy made him direct heir to his bachelor step-brother, Nathaniel, the 3rd Baron. Moreover, Curzon's own father, Alfred Nathaniel, was his younger son. The patrimony would by law pass from the 3rd bachelor Baron to his legitimate brother, Alfred and then to his eldest son George Nathaniel. But Alfred died in 1850, before he could come into his inheritance leaving his eldest son George to succeed to Kedleston Hall. As the younger son, Curzon's father had reconciled himself to the family parish. However, the unexpected horseback accident killed George Nathaniel before he could come into his patrimony. On the death of the 3rd Baron in 1856, the peerage therefore passed to Curzon's father.

The unmarried, George Nathaniel had been in the

habit of frequenting London's Rotten Row in the hope of catching a glimpse of his former lady-love who had spurned him for a wealthier suitor. One day just as he was leaving the Row, the fickle lady passed by with her mother in their carriage and condescended to toss a nod at her erstwhile suitor. He promptly tried to reciprocate but the movement proved too much for his horse who reared up, fatally dashing his mount against the curb. The premature and unexpected death of this uncle led to Curzon's coming into his inheritance of Kedleston Hall.

The new 25-year-old 4th Baron who came into his unexpected inheritance was plagued by anxieties . Two illegitimate sons of the 2nd Baron were living in 1856 when the 3rd Baron died. If the 2nd Baron's marriage in 1798, before the birth of his father, was not valid in English law, the estates would pass, by a family settlement of 1816, to the 2nd Baron's illegitimate issue in order of seniority. The two living illegitimate uncles who stood to benefit were Edward Curzon, a retired admiral and Frederic, Rector of Mickleover. It was only in 1857 that Curzon's father was able to prove in English courts the validity of his grandparents' marriage in 1798 which made him the rightful heir to the peerage and the estates.

What emerges from this complicated story is the permissive sexual mores of the era. No one seems to be particularly shocked by the fact that the 2nd Baron should live in sin, as it were, with a Flemish girl for almost thirteen years before marrying her. The six illegitimate children he sired seem to be accepted equally casually by society. In fact they rose to honoured professions, of an admiral and a cleric. Curzon's father, the

4th Baron, paid them a handsome annuity out of the revenues of the estate. What seems particularly remarkable is that the cleric grandson should take his grandfather's lasciviousness well in his stride.

The 18th century was widely accepted as a sexually promiscuous age, especially among the aristocracy. The collapse of moral Puritanism, as a dominant influence in society after 1660 had led to the general secularization of society. Prominent among its features was the release of the libido from age-old restraints of Christianity;¹ one of the marked changes being a rapid increase in extra-marital sex among the court aristocracy which soon spread to the rural elite.² Dramatist Richard Sheridan said, "In Oliver Cromwell's time they were all precise canting creatures. And no sooner did Charles II come over than they turned gay rakes and libertines."³

Rakes had been tolerated by society so long as they provided for their illegitimate brood. In 1790 there were brought up at Devonshire House and Chatsworth a whole collection of oddly assorted children: three being the children of the 5th Duke of Devonshire and his Duchess Georgiana and two of the Duke and Lady Elizabeth Foster, the Duchess's most intimate friend and lifelong companion, while one child of the Duke and Charlotte Spencer and one of the Duchess and Lord Grey were brought up elsewhere.⁴

¹ Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800 (Penguin Books, 1979), p.327.

² Ibid, p.328.

³ Richard Sheridan as quoted by Stone, ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p.331.

Pornography and erotic poetry of Marquis de Sade had gained popularity in France. Sir Francis Dashwood had set up the Fire Club with its obscene ceremonial in England and its counterpart, the society of Beggars Benison, was set up in Scotland in 1732: its mottoes being "Be Faithful and Multiply" and "Loose no Opportunity".¹ The 2nd Baron had been a member of the Beggars Benison. In 1921, Curzon was writing to his second wife Grace about it:

I have come across all the papers about the marriage of Beggars Benison with Felicite Wattines. They had 5 sons and 1 daughter before they were married in 1798 when living in Altona just outside Hamburg. From the papers it appears that he thought that under the law of Hamburg, then a Free State, this would legitimise the children already born. He was finally married in the house of the Rector at Hamburg; and then arose the question - was the record of the marriage without banns and without an Entry in the Register of any Church a valid marriage? This was fought out in the law courts and in the affirmative.

By the time that the 3rd Lord who was the eldest son of Beggars Benison and his 1st wife died in 1856 and my father succeeded - only 2 of the illegits were living and they, being very fond of my father who gave them both a handsome annuity, decided it was no good fighting² the case which they would certainly have lost.

The 4th Baron, Rev. Alfred Curzon was born on July 12, 1831. He schooled at Dr. Arnold's Rugby before proceeding to Merton College, Oxford. He took his B.A. in 1852

¹ Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969), p.18.

² Curzon to Grace, Sept.8, 1921, CA.285.

Mrs. Grace Duggan, later Marchioness Curzon of Kedleston (1877-1958), Married Curzon in 1917. Daughter of Joseph Hinds, formerly United States Ambassador to Brazil and widow of Brazilian millionaire Alfred Duggan.

and M.A. thirteen years later in 1865. In 1854 he received the Deacon's Orders and was made a priest in 1855. A year later, he became Lord Scarsdale, by the death of his uncle. He died in 1916 leaving four sons and six daughters.

Upon becoming 4th Baron, Curzon's father did not divest himself of the Holy Orders. The responsibilities of a landowner with a 10,000-acre estate gave little time to preside at the services. But he supervised the curates and never forgot his first calling. His children were to complain that while he would spend money on repairing a labourer's cottage, he would turn a freezing glare to any suggestion for renovating Kedleston. Curzon's first wife Mary wrote, "He looks at the dilapidated rooms with grim satisfaction."¹

Lord Scarsdale shared the family pride for Kedleston with its vast marble reception hall where twenty soaring columns of purest alabaster support a high gilded ceiling. Gigantic galleries curve out on either side of the main building to two smaller supporting wings on either side; one for the family, the other for the servants. Massive wrought-iron gates, emblazoned with the family crest in gold, enclose the estate. A gravelled road winds its long sedate way between a phalanx of stately oaks and it stands majestically in a vast expanse of lush green lawns. Three architects moulded Kedleston. Brettingham and Paine envisaged the main plan of a central pile with its extending wings. Later, a third young man was brought in. Robert Adam, youthful, inexperienced but bright, was nowhere

¹ Nigel Nicolson, Mary Curzon, (London, 1977), p.86.
Mary Victoria Leiter (1870-1906). Curzon's first wife whom he married in 1895, after a five-year courtship. Daughter of Chicago millionaire Levi Leiter.

near making his name as one of England's foremost architects then. Kedleston was one of his first big assignments and it was Adam's genius that transformed it from a mere wealthy nobleman's residence to one of the prized stately homes in England.¹

Kedleston Hall was built with patrician abandon by Alfred Nathaniel's great-grandfather, the 1st Baron Lord Scarsdale, whose investments in the East India Company and the American Colonies had multiplied. Only 60 years earlier, the 1st Baron's ancestor had built a new manor house for the family in red brick. But with new money the 1st Baron felt the existing house to be too modest a dwelling for his taste. He decided to demolish the house and build anew. Architects were consulted. They posed a problem: to build the sort of dwelling desired by milord would require vast open spaces. It would mean shifting of the entire village of Kedleston. The 1st Baron approached his friend King George III. The King obliged in a fittingly regal gesture. By an Act of Parliament the public highway was diverted and the entire village shifted to a mile away from the required site. Thus began the building of Kedleston.²

The family was never wealthy, which was probably what made Horace Walpole after a visit to Kedleston in 1768 write cattily: "A fine park with old timber, beautiful gateway with lovely iron gate by Adam, a vast house with four wings, of which two only yet built, and magnificently finished and furnished, all designed by Adam in the best of taste but too expensive for his [Scarsdale's] estate."³

¹ Interview with 3rd Viscount Scarsdale.

² Ibid.

³ Leonard Mosley, Curzon, the End of an Epoch(London,1960), pp.3-4.

Nor were the Scarsdales particularly distinguished. Curzon said, "My ancestors have held Kedleston for 900 years, father and son, but none of them ever distinguished himself. They were just ordinary country gentlemen...M.R. Sheriffs, and so on."¹ The estate was heavily mortgaged when Curzon's father inherited it. But with his economy and good management, Lord Scarsdale was able to leave a gross figure of £ 454,694 in his will.² Irene, his grandchild and Curzon's daughter, came out warmly in the old man's defence. "My grandfather put every penny of his income to its best use. Having to provide for his vast family, he could only give his eldest son a modest allowance, which necessitated a strict supervision of expenditure."³ A sign in the kitchen certainly said "waste not, want not", but it would be hardly true to say the house was run on the lines of a country vicarage as has been claimed.⁴ The family generally lived very comfortably. They dined off silver plate, there being enough for 72 people.⁵ They were waited upon by a hierarchy of servants befitting a nobleman's residence. In the holidays the family took regular vacations either to the seaside or to London where they stayed at the fashionable Burlington Hotel off Piccadilly on Regent Street.

¹ Lord Riddell, Lord Riddell's Intimate Diary of the Peace Conference and After, 1918-23 (London, 1933), p.184.

² Rose, op.cit, p.26.

³ Baroness Ravensdale, Little Innocents: Childhood Reminiscences (London, 1932), p.11.
Baroness Irene Ravensdale (1896-1966).

⁴ Sir Harold Nicolson, Curzon, the Last Phase (London, 1934), p.9.

⁵ Ravensdale, op.cit., p.11-2.

But Curzon's father never gave up his Holy Orders preferring to call himself Rev. Lord Scarsdale. His father, that is Curzon's grandfather, had been the seventh son of the 2nd Baron and under normal circumstances Curzon would have been an ordinary country gentleman. Curzon prized the accidents of fate which brought him into his inheritance and spent much of his life trying to maintain an affected aristocratic style which he felt was befitting his status; at times it degenerated into parody.
