CHAPTER XI

THE IRISH QUESTION AND VOTES FOR WOMEN

1916-1918

THESE first years of Lord Curzon's experience as a Cabinet Minister were necessarily burdened with the conduct of the war All else was overshadowed by one all absorbing purpose—that of inflicting defeat upon the enemy. Domestic differences were as far as possible tabooed. Yet it was not possible wholly to banish from the Council room the wraiths of former controversies. On June the 28th, 1916, Lord Curzon had lifted the curtain a little on a scene of discord in the proceedings of a supposedly harmonious Cabinet. "We have been having terrible internal ructions over Ireland," he told Lord Lamington; "but I think that the Cabinet will survive."

It had, assuredly, not been of their own choice that Mr. Asquith's Cabinet had laid their fingers, at such a time, upon the thorny ramifications of the Irish question. The Irish question had, in fact, forced itself upon the Cabinet—abruptly and in a manner full of menace. On the evening of the 24th of April, 1916, a telegram from Dublin Castle had been placed in the hands of the Chief Secretary in London. From the laconic message which it contained a harassed Government had learned that at noon on that day an insurrection had broken out in Dublin, that an attack had been made upon the Castle, and that a number of important buildings in the city had been occupied by rebel forces.

The rebellion was suppressed; but the unhealthy state of Ireland, of which the rebellion was but a symptom, remained, calling imperatively for action. And since, in the circumstances of the time, it

was inevitable that any action that a Liberal Prime Minister was in the least likely to agree to, should run counter to Unionist rather than to Irish Nationalist principles, Lord Curzon, as a leading member of the Unionist wing of the Coalition Government, found himself involved in a peculiarly distasteful controversy:

Had circumstances allowed he would never, I think, have taken any very active interest in the Irish question. Though his attitude towards the Home Rule issue was that conventionally demanded of a member of the Conservative party, the whole question was one which was incidental rather than essential to his own political creed. And it is somewhat remarkable that, though he himself held an Irish peerage and owed his seat in the House of Lords to the suffrages of the small and specialised constituency of Irish peers, he had never once in the course of all his travels set foot in Ireland. His general view was that the existing Constitution of the United Kingdom had proved its worth and was superior to any other that had been suggested. The various schemes of devolution which had been widely canvassed at the time of the party truce following upon the death of King Edward, he had dismissed as fantastic, or, at least, far-fetched. There was no room, he declared in a speech at Bristol, for six Parliaments in these petty islands. And to this view he had steadfastly adhered. "Like A. J. Balfour," he wrote some time later when the idea of the creation of ten or twelve Parliaments for Great Britain had been put forward once again as a possible solution of the problem—this time by Mr. Winston Churchill at Dundee—"I favour the existing Constitution because I think on the whole it is the best; and I do not want even for the *beaux yeux* of Ireland to set up all these Parliaments, Ministries, Exchequers, Powers . . . I do not want even two Parliaments in England. One will kill the other."[1] And there he would have been content to leave matters.

With the passage of the Parliament Act, however, the Irish question had taken on a new and more menacing phase, for the prospect of a Home Rule Bill being forcibly placed upon the Statute Book under its provisions had stirred feeling in the North of Ireland to such an extent as to make it unmistakably clear that the people of

[1]Letter to Lord Selborne.

Ulster would resist by force any attempt on the part of the Government to subject them to the rule of an Irish Parliament sitting in Dublin. And Lord Curzon, in common with all who were actively concerned with the politics of the time, found himself obliged to give serious attention to the problem.

His own strong inclination would have been to see an attempt made to find a solution by consent. Reference has been made in an earlier chapter to the deep impression which had been made upon his mind by the success with which a Constitution had been fashioned in South Africa ; and, given a similar spirit of good will, he believed that British statesmanship should be capable of achieving in the case of Ireland what had been secured in even more difficult circumstances in South Africa.

> " I happened to be in South Africa when the South African Constitution was being drawn up," he stated in the House of Lords. " The circumstances were even more difficult than those of framing a Constitution for Ireland, because the two parties were not only separated by great differences of race, religion, and so on, but had been actually engaged in war. You may almost say that the hands of the people who met in conference had been imbrued in each other's blood. How was it done ? The four States elected their delegates and sent up their most important men. Those persons met in conference, first in Durban, next in Cape Town, and then in Bloemfontein, the three capitals. They met without the embarrassing presence of the Press and they discussed the matter in secret conclave. Between the sittings they met constantly, and I had the honour of meeting them and hearing them converse in private houses and elsewhere. Line by line, word by word, they went through the proposed Constitution. They did not approach the matter as antagonists ; they approached it as statesmen. Not a single man had any desire to revive old sores or to score off the other party. They wanted to build up a new Constitution in which all could join for the benefit of the country. Something is to be learned from that. Further, when the Constitution had been drawn up, it was submitted

> to the Parliaments of the various States concerned, and in the case of one State, Natal, of whose adhesion there was some doubt, it was actually sent on referendum to the people. If you are constructing a new Constitution for a country sundered by great differences, that is the method and those are the lines on which you ought to proceed."[1]

Lord Curzon believed, moreover, that outside the ranks of party, there would be found to exist a strong desire for an amicable settlement. "I am not at all happy about this Home Rule question," he wrote in September 1911. "If, as I believe, the Government mean to bring in a purely partisan measure to satisfy Redmond and make things easy for themselves without regard to statesmanship, or to Ulster, then no opposition on our part can be too strong. But if we exhibit no capacity to deal with the matter ourselves, if we have no alternative policy and if we merely fight the Home Rule Bill on the old lines, then I am half disposed to think we shall fail in the country."[2]

Lord Lansdowne sympathised with his point of view, but was painfully conscious of the difficulties in the way. "I have myself always been ready to treat respectfully proposals for a further devolution of public business to local bodies; but that is very thin ice, and you may remember I got into much hot water for allowing Anthony MacDonnell to talk to me about his Devolution scheme. Up to the present time I have heard of no policy which we could, and Redmond would, look at for a moment."[3] Lord Curzon agreed, but still urged that the door should not be irrevocably closed against all possibility of compromise.

> "The only way to solve the Home Rule question is not for us to produce a plan now; but to be willing to consider a plan (for relief of House of Commons) and to go to the Ulstermen and say—what is the maximum you will take?

[1]Speech on the 2nd reading of the Home Rule Bill in the House of Lords, on January 30th, 1913.

[2]Letter to Lord Lansdowne, September 20th, 1911.

[3]Letter from Lord Lansdowne to Lord Curzon, September 25th, 1911.

The thing has got to come in some form or other (I mean Devolution) and we want to settle it with your consent."[1]

He thought that the Government were as much to blame as the Ulster leaders for the uncompromising spirit which stalked abroad. "I do not at all want to go screaming round on the Carson lines, though I readily grant that if the Home Rule Bill is going to be, as I believe, a gigantic party job, we shall be entitled and bound to resist it by every means in our power."[2]

And when the terms of the Bill became known, he at once realised that they were such as would goad the people of Ulster into taking all the steps which they regarded as necessary to defend themselves against the attempt which was to be made to subject them to what they regarded as an intolerable tyranny. He approached the question, as he was careful to point out in his speech on the Second Reading of the Bill, from the standpoint of an Englishman whose connection with Ireland was purely accidental, who was free from any of those passionate emotions that arose from race or residence, and who could regard the matter to some extent with the detachment of an outsider. And he was convinced that in the treatment which they were proposing to mete out to Ulster they were asking too much of human nature. "You are asking Ulstermen to submit to a sacrifice which not even their great love for their country can justify." How, indeed, could the Liberal party defend the contemplated coercion of Ulster? Ever since the great Civil War there had hardly been a rebellion or an insurrection in any part of the world of a minority either suffering or fearing oppression, which had not been encouraged by members of the Liberal party in England. They had constituted themselves the international champions of the right of insurrection. They had made us the busybodies "and I suppose foreigners would say the political Pecksniffs of the world." Yet when Ulster proposed to do what in the case of Italy, or Greece, or Poland, or Hungary, or Armenia, or the Balkans, or the Sudan, they had clamorously applauded, they accused her of the wickedness of plunging the country into civil war.[3]

[1]Letter from Lord Curzon to Lord Lansdowne, September 29th, 1911. [2]*Ibid.*
[3]Speech in the House of Lords on January 30th, 1913.

But the most serious consequence which Lord Curzon apprehended from the determination of the Government to carry their Bill with the aid of the Parliament Act, was the effect which such a proceeding was bound to have upon the position of the Crown. It was understood to be the intention of the Government to place the Bill on the Statute Book before appealing to the country, but to refrain from bringing it into operation until a General Election had been held. The view of the Unionist leaders was that any such course was contrary to the spirit of the Constitution and fraught with grave peril; since not only would the passing of the Home Rule Bill into law over the heads of the people be likely to provoke a serious outbreak in Ulster, but if the subsequent verdict of the constituencies proved to be hostile to the measure, it would impose upon their successors the task of repealing legislation which had already taken its place on the Statute Book and so of depriving the Nationalist Party of the fruits of an already proclaimed victory, with results which, if incalculable, could scarcely be expected to be anything but inimical to the peace and good government of Ireland.

To Lord Curzon, as to others who had devoted their attention to this aspect of the matter, it seemed clear that if these things did indeed come to pass, the King would be held by large numbers of his subjects to have incurred a heavy measure of responsibility by giving his assent to the measure before, instead of after, an appeal to the people. To the question, had the King, as a Constitutional Monarch, the power to insist on an appeal to the country before signifying his assent to any particular measure, Lord Curzon replied in an emphatic affirmative. He did not challenge the doctrine that as a Constitutional Sovereign he could only act on the advice of a Minister; but he asserted that it had never been questioned by any Constitutional writer that, if the King was in doubt as to the advice tendered to him by his Ministers having the support of his people, he had an absolute right to change his advisers, to give the new Ministers whom he summoned the power to dissolve Parliament, and so to satisfy himself as to the wishes of the country.

But, if he entertained no doubts as to the Constitutional right of the Sovereign to act in this manner, he did not underrate the disinclination which the King might very naturally feel to reject the

advice conveyed to him by a Prime Minister with a substantial Parliamentary majority behind him; and when conferring with his more intimate colleagues he urged that, in this case, the position of the Crown should be safeguarded by the preparation of a formal statement of the King's reasons, both for urging his Ministers to agree to a reference being made to the people before the Bill became law, and—in the event of their continued unwillingness to accept his view—for acquiescing in their decision, while at the same time disclaiming any personal share of responsibility for the results of their action. Such a statement of the King's position should, he urged, be presented to the Prime Minister as a State Paper of the first importance with a plain intimation that His Majesty reserved the right, should occasion arise in which his own attitude was misrepresented or misunderstood, of demanding that its contents should be made public. So strongly did he feel upon the point that, when summoned to Balmoral in September 1913, he pleaded for the immediate preparation of such a document for presentation to the Prime Minister before the impending meeting of the Cabinet early in October, and went so far as to draw up, with the idea of laying it before the King for his consideration, the draft of such a declaration as he desired to see made.

In spite, however, of the interest which he took in this aspect of the matter and of the part which he played in the drama which was thus being enacted behind the scenes, his association with the controversy was neither so intimate nor so sustained as that of some of those who were responsible for the policy of the Unionist Party; and when, in September 1914, the Home Rule Bill received the Royal Assent, together with a Bill suspending its operation for an indefinite period,[1] he was glad enough to dismiss Ireland and the Irish question from his mind.

Hence his irritation and dismay at its rude recall in the spring of 1916. His position, and that of his Unionist colleagues in the Government, was rendered all the more difficult by reason of the rapidity with which matters developed. It was, indeed, no time for dallying and a great many things happened in a very short

[1] Actually for one year, or, if the European war was not then ended, to some other date to be fixed by an Order in Council.

space of time. The Prime Minister proceeded to Ireland in person and returned to report to his colleagues in the Cabinet. All the chief officers of the Irish Executive, including the Viceroy and the Chief Secretary, resigned. Mr. Lloyd George was offered, and refused, the office of Chief Secretary, but accompanied his refusal with an offer to make an attempt to find some common basis of agreement as between the different contending parties in Ireland.

It was only to be expected, perhaps, that out of these hurried happenings should have arisen misunderstandings. The Prime Minister had certainly not contemplated bringing the Home Rule Act into immediate, or even early, operation. Mr. Lloyd George on the other hand, while not contending that he had authority to commit the Cabinet, had assumed that he was authorised to deal with the Irish leaders on the understanding that Home Rule might be brought into immediate operation. The Irish leaders in their turn had derived the impression that Mr. Lloyd George, instead of ascertaining their views for submission to the Government, had made them a firm offer of immediate Home Rule subject to the exclusion of the six Counties of Ulster.

Rumours of these negotiations were soon circulating in Unionist quarters where they were received with cold disfavour, certain Unionist members of the House of Lords making it known to their leader that they would not shrink from throwing out a Home Rule Bill if it ever reached the Upper Chamber. Lord Curzon himself seems to have been in possession of no certain information as to the exact tenor of Mr. Lloyd George's conversations when, early in June, the report reached London of a speech delivered by Mr. Redmond at a meeting of the Irish Parliamentary party held in Dublin, according to which he had asserted that Mr. Lloyd George, after seeing and consulting men of all parties in Ireland, had formulated on his own responsibility a proposal—" which we may fairly regard as the proposal of the Government."

The speech was read with astonishment by the Unionist members of the Government; and, in the absence of Lord Lansdowne, who was spending the Whitsuntide recess in Ireland, Lord Curzon invited those of them who happened to be in London to a conference at his house to consider their position. Later the same day—June

the 17th—accompanied by Lord Robert Cecil, he sought an interview with the Prime Minister and represented to him the difficulty in which he and his friends were placed by Mr. Redmond's wholly unexpected statement. The Prime Minister agreed that the impression created by the speech was unfortunate, and declared, that since the Cabinet had never even considered any proposals, there could be no authority for the statement.

It was clear, however, that the matter could not be allowed to rest where it stood. In the absence of any official contradiction of Mr. Redmond's assertion, there was considerable perturbation in Unionist circles outside the Government, and at a meeting of the Cabinet held four days later, it was made unmistakably plain that the proposals which had been put forward by Mr. Lloyd George were not acceptable to the Government as a whole. On the other hand, there were obvious objections to bringing to an abrupt termination negotiations which had already progressed so far, and there was a disposition, among some at least of the Unionist members present, to reserve their decision on the question until they knew the exact outcome of Mr. Lloyd George's conversations. Lord Curzon, acutely sensitive to the atmosphere of suspicion in which the doings of the Cabinet were wrapped, felt the difficulty of his own position so strongly that he consulted a friend who, while concerned with the outcome of the controversy, stood nevertheless outside the ranks of party and of the Government, whether he ought to remain at his post or leave the Cabinet?

Negotiations and discussions proceeded throughout the summer; but no agreement was reached, and little real progress had been made towards a settlement when Mr. Asquith's Government fell and Mr. Lloyd George's Administration took its place.

With his inclusion in the small War Cabinet, which now became the supreme authority in the land, Lord Curzon's responsibility for the Government's policy towards Ireland became great. And he accepted the chairmanship of a small Cabinet Committee charged with the task of exploring all possible roads towards a settlement. A Bill which the Committee had reason to believe would be accepted, if with some show of reluctance, by the Irish Parliamentary party was actually drafted and submitted to the Cabinet when the Prime

Minister suddenly decided to throw upon the different parties in Ireland itself the responsibility of finding a settlement by agreement. Lord Curzon may well have felt some irritation at this abrupt rejection of the Bill which had only been drafted after endless labour on the part of his Committee. Yet an attempt to reach a settlement by means of conference on the part of those primarily concerned was in strict accord with the procedure which he had himself publicly urged. And it was with obvious sincerity that he pleaded for an atmosphere of goodwill when, on May the 21st, he announced in the House of Lords that invitations had been issued by the Prime Minister to the groups most closely interested, to send delegates to a Convention which was to be entrusted with an attempt to arrive at a solution of the centuries-old Irish problem by consent.

The Convention was to be free to consider any plan. "We see no necessity," he explained when commending the proposal to Parliament and the country, "if the Convention be summoned, to restrict its independence, or to embarrass its action by any instructions. Once they take their seats in the boat they must elect to steer their own course. This means, in practice, that no suggestions of policy or scheme will be ruled out of consideration. The doors will be open to any or every plan." The example of South Africa was ever present to his mind. He recalled the freedom with which in the assured secrecy of the conference room, the representatives of different and often conflicting interests had explained their own points of view and listened to those of others; and he laid it down as an important condition that if the Convention was to have a reasonable chance of success, it must sit behind closed doors. There must be no publication of authorised or unauthorised accounts of its proceedings. In an impassioned peroration he pleaded for the goodwill of all parties towards the plan.

> "The British Parliament has more than once tried its hand at a settlement of the Irish problem. Its efforts have been attended with conspicuous failure. During the last thirty years British statesmen have exhausted all the resources of their eloquence, their enthusiasm, their ability, in the effort to find a solution. They also have failed. Everybody now realises that

settlement must now come from Irishmen themselves. No one else knows so well as Irishmen how Irishmen want to be governed, or ought to be governed. Let them tell us in conclave. We, in your Lordship's House, can contribute a little by saying nothing and doing nothing in this debate or in subsequent proceedings which will interfere with that aim. The British public can, I think, do a good deal more by acting in sympathy. Above all, Irishmen themselves can contribute much by an exhibition of those qualities of calm patriotism, bold initiative and rich imagination which have made them one of the most attractive peoples of the earth. The tide is running fast in Ireland. I pray God that on this occasion we may not miss it."[1]

The hope, that at long last a real and generally acceptable solution of the Irish question was in sight, was tempered by contemplation of the debris of many shattered efforts in the past. But the sincerity and grace of the language in which Lord Curzon's appeal was couched, were widely recognised. "As an oratorical effort Lord Curzon's speech was a masterpiece, and he was delightful to listen to." Whether his arguments had carried conviction to the minds of those who were inclined to view with suspicion what wore the appearance of an enforced attempt to pacify Ireland, was another matter. "But if choice of language and felicity of expression could contribute to the end Lord Curzon achieved a notable success."[2]

The conditions which had made success possible in South Africa were, unhappily, not present in Ireland. The element in the Irish people, which hated England and would have welcomed her destruction, grew apace. The decision of the Government to release the leaders of the rebellion of 1916 may have been a courageous one. If so, it scarcely met with the reward which it deserved. Those who believed that in Ireland, in the circumstances of the time, magnanimity would inevitably be construed as fear, complained bitterly of the folly of the Executive. It may be that the Sinn Fein movement would have grown whatever policy the Government had pursued; but, whatever doubt there may be as to that, there

[1] Speech in the House of Lords on May 21st, 1917.
[2] *Irish Times* of May 22nd, 1917.

is at least no doubt that it was the rapid growth of Sinn Fein during the latter half of the year 1917 that all but smashed the Convention and rendered its labours sterile.

During the opening weeks of its deliberations there was noticeable a genuine desire among all parties to reach agreement; and by October such progress had been made that a Committee of twenty members was charged with the task of drafting a scheme for submission to the whole body. Six weeks later the Convention was described by one of its members as being "in the throes of dissolution." The factor in the situation which had wrought this disastrous change was, undoubtedly, the tremendous accession of strength throughout the south and west of Ireland to the banner of Republicanism. The movement towards Republicanism had long been there; and the people at large were dimly conscious of this moving force stirring in their midst. But they had not hitherto consciously or deliberately thrown in their lot with it. Ireland was, in fact, trembling on the brink of a fateful decision. She had reached one of those breathless moments in the history of nations when a feather in the scale on one side or the other is sufficient to weigh it irretrievably down. In 1917 the feather fluttered in the air and dropped down finally into the Republican scale. A Sinn Fein rebel of the name of Ashe went on hunger strike in jail and subsequently died. His funeral was made the occasion of a vast demonstration. Thousands of men wearing Republican badges, many in uniform, some armed, all under military discipline, accompanied by a firing party, openly flouted the authority of the Government. All Ireland was watching; all Ireland saw the orders of the Government disregarded with impunity; and all Ireland drew its own conclusions. A moderate member of the Convention estimated that the number of Sinn Feiners had been increased that day by tens of thousands; a Nationalist member was heard to say that he did not know who was trying to govern Ireland at this moment; and many shrewd judges concluded that the Irish people had at last come to believe that the British Government were afraid of them, and that anything could be wrested from them—even independent representation at the Peace Conference when it came—provided that they threatened violence.

From that moment settlement by consent was doomed. The ferment outside was reflected in the altered atmosphere in the conference chamber itself. The Convention concluded its labours and issued a Report; but no real agreement had been reached.

The Government in London were sorely disappointed. They had pledged themselves, failing substantial agreement on the part of the Convention, to produce a Home Rule Bill and to make provision for Ulster. But the divisions in the Convention were reflected in the Cabinet; and the settlement which might have been reached as a result of the efforts of Lord Curzon's Committee a year before was far less easy of attainment now. "We had a long Cabinet this morning," Lord Curzon wrote on April the 5th, "mainly on our new man power proposals for next week and on our Irish policy, which is a matter of the deepest gravity and may wreck the Government. A Committee was to meet this afternoon to investigate one particular subject, and we were told to hold ourselves in readiness at our houses to be summoned either this evening or to-morrow morning. Our meeting to-morrow is to be followed by a meeting of all the Ministers (both inside and outside the Cabinet) and there may be another Cabinet after that."[1]

The result of these discussions was the appointment on April the 13th of another Committee under the chairmanship of Mr., afterwards Lord, Long, upon which Lord Curzon consented, though reluctantly, to serve.

But just as in 1917 the wave of Republicanism which had then swept over Ireland had rendered abortive the labours of the Convention, so in 1918 did the movement bring to nought the attempts of the Government to effect a settlement. And, when Lord Curzon rose to address the House of Lords on June the 20th, it was not to commend to their consideration a Bill for the better government of Ireland, but to explain that in face of the revelations made to the Cabinet in May of "a sinister and formidable conspiracy of the leaders of the Sinn Fein Movement in Ireland with the enemy of this country"—revelations which had occasioned in the Government "surprise and consternation"—it was considered impossible then to proceed with their proposals.

[1]Letter to Lady Curzon.

Thus ended for the time being, at any rate, the Government's endeavour to bring about a settlement of the Irish question by consent. And, when two years later an Irish Home Rule Bill was brought in and passed, Lord Curzon was too deeply absorbed in the work of the Foreign Office, to which he had succeeded as Foreign Minister in 1919, to play any very prominent part in the proceedings.

The Irish question was not the only subject of acute domestic controversy that came up for decision during the war. The question of Woman Suffrage became suddenly urgent in 1917, and proved none the less embarrassing to Lord Curzon because it ran counter to, rather than in conformity with, the normal lines of party cleavage. It is scarcely necessary to remind the reader of these volumes that throughout his life Lord Curzon had been one of the most vigorous and outspoken opponents of the Suffragist movement. When the question had first become a live issue, he had thrown himself enthusiastically into the fight and had devoted his remarkable talents as a beggar to collecting funds for the purpose of organising opposition to the movement. In 1910 he had approached Lord Cromer and Lady Jersey, who were at that time in control of the two organisations which had been formed to combat the policy—one a man's Society and the other a Woman's League—and had urged amalgamation. In co-operation with Lord Cromer he had collected, within a space of three months, a fund amounting, in sums actually paid and promised, to more than £20,000. And after Lord Cromer's retirement from the Presidentship of the newly formed League in February 1912, he had accepted that office—a position which he retained until its dissolution in 1918.

The question became a matter of immediate practical concern when, in the early part of 1917, a clause conferring the Parliamentary franchise upon women was inserted in a Representation of the People Bill, providing for a large extension of the existing franchise, which was then under discussion in the House of Commons. With this unforeseen event, the officials of the Anti-Suffrage League, whose activities had been diverted into other channels during the war, found themselves suddenly faced with the task of organising opposition to the proposal both in Parliament and in the country; and they turned at once to Lord Curzon for counsel and assistance.

It was soon seen that in the House of Commons their cause was a lost one. The part played by women in the war had brought about a marked revulsion of feeling on the question, and on the division, the opponents of the measure were able to muster only 55 votes as against the 385 votes given for it.

In these circumstances the organisers of the Anti-Suffrage League realised that their only hope of saving the situation lay in an appeal to the House of Lords. And in the fight in the Upper Chamber, if fight there was to be, they looked naturally enough to their President for powerful aid. At a meeting at his house in June, at which the procedure to be adopted was discussed between him and certain members of the Committee of the League, he declared himself ready to speak against the Clause when the Bill came before the House of Lords; and on the minds of some at least of those who were present he left the impression—though that he had ever committed himself to this extent was subsequently denied—that he would reinforce his speech by his vote. He does not seem to have realised, until much nearer the time, how difficult he might find it to reconcile his position as a member of the Government and Leader of the House of Lords with his position as President of the Anti-Suffrage League. Even when it dawned across his mind that his own liberty of action was likely to be restricted by his official position, he did not find in this knowledge any reason for resigning from the Presidentship of the League or for ceasing to encourage its members in their opposition to the measure. While the debate on the Second Reading of the Bill was in progress in the House of Lords he informed Mr. Arnold Ward, M.P., verbally, that he had come to the conclusion that as Leader of the House he would not himself be able to vote against the clause on the Committee stage of the Bill; but the disappointment caused to the Anti-Suffragists by this announcement was mitigated by the speech which he made in the course of the Second Reading debate. He went out of his way, in the course of his remarks, to lay stress upon the fact that the Bill was not a Government Bill in the ordinary sense of the word, and that on such questions as Proportional Representation and Women Suffrage members were left free to vote as they pleased. This declaration was hailed with satisfaction by

the members of the Anti-Suffrage League, and an expression of their gratification was conveyed to Lord Curzon by Mrs. Humphry Ward, who was now acting as Chairman of the League's Executive Committee, in a letter written on December the 23rd—"May I congratulate you warmly on your speech? It was most important to us to have it laid down that the Bill is not a Government Bill and that there will be absolute freedom of speaking and voting upon it."

He certainly gave the League no reason to suppose that, short of voting against the Clause himself, he did not still intend to do what lay in his power to secure its rejection. The people to get at, he urged in a letter to the Chairman on December the 30th, were the peers themselves; and he advised the despatch of a circular letter to every member of the House of Lords a few days before the Clause came up for consideration. Such a letter, he declared, should serve "to bring up a good many to vote, and after all that is what you want for the moment."

The rejection of the Clause was moved by Lord Loreburn on January the 10th. When Lord Curzon rose to address the House he said that speaking neither for the Government, nor as Leader of the House of Lords, but merely as an individual, he regarded the proposal contained in the Clause as one which would introduce "a vast, incalculable, and almost catastrophic change, which, whatever might be their views about it, was without precedent in history and without justification in experience. If your Lordships pass this part of the Bill," he exclaimed, "you are doing more than crossing the Rubicon—you are opening the flood gates to a stream which for good or evil will submerge many landmarks we have known." He proceeded to demolish the arguments advanced in support of the change, and scoffed at the suggestion that Parliament possessed any mandate for it from the country. It was a powerful—some may well have thought an unanswerable—condemnation of the measure, which did the utmost credit to the President of the Anti-Suffrage League.

But Lord Curzon had not finished. "Logically," he declared at the close of his indictment, "the direct consequence of everything I have said is that I should support the amendment." Here was the

first faint suggestion of an impending sensation; and the House hung breathlessly on his next words. "I do not intend to do so," he added. With this theatrical anti-climax, the whole tenor of his speech underwent a dramatic change. To his bewildered listeners it seemed as though with a single sentence he had abruptly thrust from him alike his obligations as President of the Anti-Suffrage League, and the freedom of opinion which he had claimed as an individual, and had donned in their place the strait-jacket of official responsibility. Woman Suffrage, he pointed out, had been inserted in the Bill by an overwhelming majority of the House of Commons. He asked them seriously to contemplate what might happen if in such circumstances they were to come into collision with the Lower Chamber. For himself, he concluded, he could not assume the responsibility of embarking on a course which might well precipitate a conflict.

It is doubtful if Lord Curzon could have taken a course which was more certain to secure the passage of the Clause. It was felt that, if a man could deliver so scathing and impassioned an indictment of the change and yet feel bound not to stand in the way of its adoption, his reasons for not doing so must be strong indeed. "There had been doubt about the result of this critical division," wrote an onlooker, "until the speech of Lord Curzon, Leader of the House. He told their Lordships frankly that if Woman Suffrage was eliminated the Bill would not survive. In these circumstances Lord Curzon stated that he would abstain from the division. This announcement sent a chill of disappointment into the hearts of the anti-suffragists, for it meant the frustration of their high hopes. There was an instant rally to the suffrage side and an addition of several waverers to the Mugwumps."[1]

The members of the Anti-Suffrage League were at first bewildered. Why advise us to bring up peers to vote against the Clause, they asked, only to exhort them to abstain when the crucial moment for doing so arrived? Bewilderment was quickly succeeded by resentment. "I have received several abusive letters from members of the League," Lord Curzon complained in a letter to Mrs. Humphry Ward three days later, "for my conduct in speaking

[1] The Parliamentary correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle* in its issue of January the 11th, 1918.

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against Woman Suffrage in the House of Lords in my private capacity as I had promised to do, and refraining from voting, as Leader of the House, as I had told your son and everyone concerned—after much reflection—that I had no alternative but to do." In vain was it represented to him that it was not so much his actual abstention from voting as the manner of his doing so, that was resented.

> "As to your speech," wrote Mrs. Humphry Ward, in reply to his complaint, " . . . it seemed more and more impossible that it should not be followed by a vote. If your views were still such, was it conceivable that you should not give effect to them by your vote? I began to think Arnold must have been mistaken.[1] Then came the anti-climax, all the more effective because of the vehemence of the speech. You warned the House in the gravest tones of what the consequences of throwing out the Clause would be—that it would be a challenge to the Commons from which the Lords could not emerge with credit and so on. The effect was immediate and absolutely disastrous."[2]

The whole thing was an illustration of what has been said before, that Lord Curzon's imagination was not precisely of the type which enabled him to put himself in other people's skins. It was the story of the Parliament Bill over again—thoughtless encouragement of his friends in opposition to the measure and then, without warning or explanation, the adoption of a diametrically opposite attitude himself. In the one case, as in the other, he seemed to be incapable of understanding that the real cause of the bitterness which he excited was that, while encouraging the League in its policy of opposition to the measure and acting up to the letter of his undertaking to them by speaking against the Clause, he had then completely stultified his whole attitude up to that point by his subsequent procedure. It would, surely, have been easy to have disarmed the sort of criticism to which he laid himself open, had he frankly explained to the Committee of the League the position in which he found himself as soon as he himself realised it, and offered in the circumstances to resign the Presidentship.

[1] i.e. in reporting to the Committee of the League in December that Lord Curzon had decided not to vote. [2] Letter dated January 16th, 1918.