CHAPTER XII

THE COMING OF PEACE

1918-1919

THE cessation of hostilities under the terms of the Armistice concluded on November the 11th, 1918, brought to an end the understanding under which the Government had been carried on during the war. It was realised on all sides that a General Election could not be long delayed; and a question requiring an early answer was, therefore, should there be a break-up of the Coalition and a return to party? Opinion differed.

Lord Curzon, as we have seen, had never been a very ardent advocate of the idea of Coalition government, and his experience of the working of the two National Governments of which he had been a member, though satisfactory on the whole, had nevertheless not blinded him to the possible consequences of any attempt to stereotype such a form of Government in times of peace. Any such attempt would involve the formation of a Centre party and the consequent disappearance of the two historic parties as he had known them; and to any such contingency he was altogether opposed.

> "I heard with some alarm this evening," he wrote in February 1918, "that the Prime Minister was thinking of appointing a Joint Committee to arrange for organisation and programme of a new party under himself, to fight our battle at the next Election and to follow him hereafter. Further, that Milner (who is not a Conservative or a Unionist in the ordinary sense) is to be chairman of the Conservative section of the Committee.

If the above is correct, I should like to say at once that the movement is one which not only can I not support, but which I think to be entirely mistaken. As matters stand, I agree that if there were to be a General Election in the near future, it would be the duty of our party to give the fullest support to the Prime Minister for the prosecution of the war to the end—the object, indeed the sole object, for which the Coalition was formed and still exists. But, from the idea that our party should merge its identity in some new party, or should pledge its allegiance after peace has returned, I entirely dissent and I hope that you as our Leader will give no encouragement to it."[1]

It was not inconsistent with this view that he should have agreed with those who held in November, 1918, that the time had not yet come for a dissolution of the ties which had united representatives of Conservatism, Liberalism and Labour in the prosecution of the war.

"I had a few words with the Prime Minister about the General Election this afternoon," he wrote in a letter to Mr. Bonar Law, one day early in November. "I told him that I was in favour of as early a General Election as can be managed. I think the Government (I am assuming that they go to the country as a Coalition Government asking for a renewal of support) require a fresh national mandate if they are either to conduct the war to an end—should the Armistice break down—or if they are to undertake the even more difficult labours of the Peace Conference."

The question of the exact nature of the appeal to be made to the electors was not so simple.

"As to a programme I cannot speak; it is difficult to construct any programme in a week or two, and very difficult to go beyond general propositions in the present case. But I should

[1] Letter to Mr. Bonar Law, February 25th, 1918.

"And with the acceptance of those terms in their completion," he added, "the great fabric of over-weening ambition and towering pride reared by the Sovereigns and the peoples of the Central Empires, has toppled over and come with a crash to the ground. Rarely, my Lords, in history, has there been a fall from a pinnacle so high to a pit of such irretrievable disaster."

He laid stress upon the solemnity and the greatness of the hour, and upon the wonder of the victory. "Are we presumptuous," he asked, "if we see in it the judgment of a Higher Power upon panoplied arrogance and enthroned wrong?"

He paid a fine tribute to the steadfastness of the British people whose spirit, he declared, had never wavered.

"In those fateful days in August 1914, the inhabitants of this country, with quick and unerring instinct, grasped the true nature of the struggle upon which they were about to embark. They saw that it was not merely a question of our fidelity to Treaties or of the security of our shores, but it was a struggle between two great methods or principles of governing the world. It was the old historic secular conflict between Ormuzd and Ahriman—between the principles of good and evil—in the governance of men."

He spoke of the unity of all classes of the people and of the solidarity of the Empire.

"Among the many miscalculations of the enemy was the profound conviction, not only that we had a contemptible little army, but that we were a doomed and decadent nation. The trident was to be struck from our palsied grasp; the Empire was to crumble at the first shock; a nation dedicated, as we used to be told, to pleasure-taking and the pursuit of wealth, was to be deprived of the place to which it had ceased to have any right, and was to be reduced to the level of a second-class, or perhaps even a third-class Power. It is not

think that a formula is capable of being devised that would enable candidates to ask with sufficient confidence for the votes of their constituents. One thing is certain, viz., that the old party programmes are obsolete. Asquith's attempt to serve up the stale dishes of his—and the reception it has met with—are sufficient proof of this."

And it was on the ground that it was in the best interests of the commonweal, that he appealed to Conservatives to give their support to a National Government. The task of reconstructing the national, industrial and social life was one which called for national, not party, effort; for co-operation, not isolated action; for good fellowship and not for faction. Only a Government which was conscious of representing all parties and classes in the nation would be sufficiently strong to shoulder successfully the burden of the immediate future.[1]

The majority of the Cabinet shared these views and, though the Labour party withdrew from the Coalition and Mr. Asquith led a Liberal campaign against the Government, it was as a Coalition that the latter appealed to, and received the support of, the country.

Before a General Election could be held, however, there were certain proceedings of a formal nature to be carried through. The relief felt on all sides at the termination of the war demanded definite expression; and on November the 18th, Lord Curzon rose from his place in the House of Lords to move that an humble Address be presented to His Majesty congratulating him on the conclusion of the Armistice and on the prospect of a victorious peace. The occasion was one to which Lord Curzon was especially well fitted to do justice. The subject lent itself to the particular style of oratory which he affected, and his speech proved worthy of the occasion. At the table at which he stood, he reminded those whom he was addressing, had been read out, within a period of less than three weeks, the terms of the Armistices successively imposed on Turkey, Austria-Hungary and the German Empire.

[1] Manifesto issued by Lord Curzon as President of the Association of Conservative clubs.

for us in the hour of victory to boast that these predictions have been falsified; but at least we may say this—that the British flag never flew over a more powerful or a more united Empire than now; Britons never had better cause to look the world in the face; never did our voice count for more in the councils of the nations, or in determining the future destinies of mankind."

Next, he accorded on behalf of the nation a joyous welcome to the prisoners of war, "streaming in driblets and sometimes in crowds, wasted but happy men, across the devastated frontiers of the fight." And he offered words of sympathy to those who had no returning victors to crown with laurels, no recovered prisoners to embrace and cheer. He paid a glowing tribute to the King and Queen who by their bearing and conduct had endeared themselves to millions of our race, and who had so lived and laboured that, where other thrones were tottering, the British Monarchy had driven fresh roots into the affections of its peoples. He prayed that the spirit of unity which had inspired the Allies during four years of fiery trial might remain with them in the future. "A little more than one hundred years ago," he reminded his audience, "the great romantic poet of our land, looking on the birth of a new Hellas, wrote these prophetic words:

'The World's great age begins anew,
The golden years return;
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn.
Heaven smiles and faiths and Empires gleam
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.'

"A similar vision now rises above a far wider horizon. May we see it, under the guidance of Providence, assume form and substance before our eyes."

Many of those who listened to the speech were deeply moved by its sincerity and grace. "I must write you a line about your speech in the House of Lords to-day," wrote one who was more

often in opposition to, than in agreement with, Lord Curzon on political questions. "It not only expressed what we all wanted to have said, but it was the most perfect piece of English eloquence and literature which I have ever listened to."[1]

Speeches by the Prime Minister and by Lord Curzon in the two Houses of Parliament were merely the prelude to a series of popular rejoicings. And it was to Lord Curzon, with his talent for organisation and his innate love of pageantry, that the Prime Minister turned to direct the series of demonstrations of popular feeling that took place during the next two years. In collaboration with Field-Marshal Sir H Wilson and Lord Stamfordham he organised the reception accorded to M. Clemenceau and Marshal Foch on the occasion of their visit to London on December the 1st, 1918. He was Chairman of the Cabinet Committee which was charged with the task of organising the Peace Celebrations which were held on July the 19th, 1919. And it is to his genius that the nation owes the simple but profoundly moving service, which recurs annually on November the 11th, before the Cenotaph in London, when the people pay homage first in reverent silence, and then in solemn prayer and song, to the memory of those who during the war made the supreme sacrifice on the altar of national duty.

The proposal for the burial of an unknown warrior in Westminster Abbey emanated from the Dean; but it was Lord Curzon, once more, who was called in to preside over the Committee appointed to devise a scheme which should combine the unveiling of the Cenotaph on Armistice Day, 1920, with the interment in the Abbey. And it may, perhaps, surprise those who habitually pictured him as a proud patrician, scornful of the claims of the people and tenacious of the rights of rank, to learn that in all these projects he argued powerfully for the prominent participation of the masses. The first scheme for celebrating the conclusion of peace drawn up by his Committee contemplated rejoicings extending over four consecutive days, including a Sunday on which Services of Thanksgiving were to be held. Lord Curzon laid down that one of these four days should be *par excellence* a day of merrymaking for the masses of the people, both in London and in the provinces, and that

[1]Letter from Lord Harcourt, November 18th, 1918.

every effort should be made to give them their share in the celebrations. The programme on the other days, he pointed out, would be to a great extent official. But the final day should be, "as far as possible, non-official, spontaneous and democratic." And if much of what he and his Committee planned was destined to be still-born, this was due to no lack of imagination or enthusiasm on his part, but to circumstances arising which necessitated an earlier celebration than had been intended, and the compression of the programme into a single day.

Similarly, in the proposals which he submitted to the Committee appointed to arrange for the burial of the unknown warrior, it was the people whose claims to participation he kept constantly before him. He argued strongly against anything that would "detract from the simplicity of the ceremonial and lend histrionic and pompous elements to a solemn service." And he was insistent in his demand that such limited accommodation as would be available in the Abbey, should be allotted "not to society ladies or the wives of dignitaries, but to selected widows and mothers of those who had fallen, especially in the humbler ranks."

. . . . .

January of the year 1919 saw the Coalition Government, with Mr. Lloyd George at its head, firmly established in office with a mandate from the country to negotiate the terms of peace and grapple with the task of reconstruction. Lord Curzon still held office as Lord President of the Council. Fate held in store, however, work of a more specialised kind. On the morning of January the 3rd, Lord Robert Cecil, who was then serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs—a post created as a temporary measure during the war—came round to 1 Carlton House Terrace with a message for Lord Curzon from the Prime Minister. Would he, in the absence of Mr Balfour and the Assistant Secretary of State at Paris in connection with the Peace Conference, take charge of the Foreign Office in London? "I said that I would readily do so," Lord Curzon wrote when reporting the conversation to the Prime Minister for confirmation; "and I undertook to commence on Monday morning, which I will do."[1]

[1] Letter to Mr. Lloyd George, January 3rd, 1919.

Thus, one day early in January, 1919, Lord Curzon realised one of the ambitions which he had formed in days which now seemed so long ago. Between him, as he took his seat at the desk in the Foreign Secretary's room, and the days of his early apprenticeship under the spacious guidance of Lord Salisbury, there yawned the gulf of 1914-19—a vast fissure torn across the face of time. Behind these long-drawn years loomed other troubled days of loosened political anchorage and grievous domestic sorrow; and behind them again the moving drama of the Indian Viceroyalty. And if, bearing upon his shoulders the burden of these strenuous years, he gazed with changed perspective at the world which lay beyond the Foreign Office window, that world itself had undergone great alteration. Troublous though the times had seemed as the 19th century had drawn towards its close, they now appeared, when viewed in retrospect, serene indeed.

> "My own acquaintance with the Foreign Office," he told the members of the Imperial Conference in 1921, "dates back to more than thirty years since I was Under Secretary to Lord Salisbury. At that time peace prevailed over the greater part of the world's surface, and we were almost excited if here and there was a patch—it might be the Sudan or Armenia or Crete—in which disturbed conditions prevailed. Now the whole world is still, although the war has ceased for two years, in a state of disturbance. As I sit in the Foreign Office and look out on the scene I am reminded of one of those lava-lakes with which some of you are familiar in the islands of the Pacific, where you observe a great liquid expanse, an uneasy movement troubling the surface, a seething and bubbling going on. From time to time a violent explosion occurs; here the banks slip down into the mud and are engulfed, while there you see new landmarks emerge. That is a picture of what is going on all over the world at the present moment."

For nine months Lord Curzon officiated at the Foreign Office in London while Mr Balfour remained in Paris. The work was none the less arduous because it was shared by two Chiefs instead

of being concentrated in the hands of one. "I had to preside at Cabinet this morning," he wrote on April the 8th, "Bonar having flown to Paris. C. Hardinge came to see me, very doleful about all that is going on there. Now I am about to think of something to say at my political dinner to-night. Then House of Lords. Oh! dear me, if only I could get half an hour off, fifteen minutes off, even five minutes off. But no such luck."[1] Work poured in on him in a never-ending stream—"Last night," he wrote on April the 10th, "I had my solitary dinner, and then twenty-seven boxes—the record up to date." And a week later—"Now for my miserable boxes, a regular barricade around me. When shall I get to bed?"[2] He had been inured to late hours ever since he had acquired the habit of working far into the night at Eton. But the strain which he imposed upon himself was becoming too great for tired nature to bear. "Last night I was so tired out with my post-midnight work, that I fell asleep in my red chair while writing at 1.30 a.m. and with difficulty struggled off to bed." On the afternoon of May the 10th, he wrote to Lady Curzon who had gone to Paris—"From now till 2 a.m. I shall not leave this house, but try to pull up some of my arrears. My room really looks like Hyde Park after a public-holiday, so great is the litter."

Mid-August saw him still toiling in London

> "It is 6.30," he wrote on the 19th. "We have had two Cabinets about Turkey and the East, sitting for five hours. The P.M. goes off to France to-morrow A.J.B. is in Paris pursuing one policy. I am here pursuing another. A.J.B. wants to take a holiday and me to take his place. I have declined. No one knows what ought to be done, and meanwhile, of course, nothing is done, and we go on getting deeper and deeper into the mire. Oh! how I long to get away and have a rest."

But he was not going to be let off so easily, and the question of his taking over the negotiations with Turkey was raised again the next day.

[1] Letter to Lady Curzon. [2] *Ibid.*

"This morning at the end of our third Cabinet—it lasted 3½ hours—in the last twenty-four hours, the conclusion was reached which I have all along predicted must come. The Cabinet led by the P.M. unanimously asked me to go out to Paris and take in hand the Eastern question, and *gave me authority for any settlement that I might like to effect.* I said at once that I could not go out now. I was tired out and needed my holiday and must insist on taking it. Otherwise I should be confronted with a complete breakdown. What I did offer to do, provided Balfour welcomed the idea, was to go out to Paris a month from now to explore the Turkish and Syrian questions with all the principal parties concerned, i.e., Clemenceau, Feisal, the Americans, the Italians, etc.—and then, after a fortnight or three weeks, report to the Government whether I had found the basis of a settlement or had failed . . ."[1]

With the best will in the world it was difficult, for two men of such different temperament, the one in Paris, the other in London, to share control of the Foreign policy of the country. "I am heartily sick of this indeterminate position," Lord Curzon wrote on September the 9th, "possessing full powers in one set of things, but powerless in others; pursuing a definite policy here which may be thrown over any day in Paris. Few can realise the unsatisfactory and almost humiliating position of being at the same time Secretary of State and yet only a substitute."[2] Mr. Balfour was no less conscious of the difficulties of the position than Lord Curzon; and he discussed them frankly on his return from a nine months' sojourn in Paris. On September the 11th Lord Curzon conveyed the gist of the conversation in a letter to Lady Curzon. "Last night I met A. J. B. at Victoria. He appeared very white in the head, clad in the most dilapidated of suits, but in tremendous spirits, calling everyone 'old man,' and beaming all round." Lord Curzon carried him off to a *tête-à-tête* dinner at the club.

"We then walked home, came into No. 1, and he did not finally leave till 12.15 a.m. I went over everything with him.

[1] Letter to Lady Curzon, August 20th, 1919.
[2] Letter to Lady Curzon.

He is never coming back to the Foreign Office in any capacity. He does not want to go back to Paris and wishes me to do the Turkish Treaty if I can combine it with Foreign Office here. He would have resigned at once had not Lloyd George pressed him to stay. He realises that this half-and-half arrangement is hard on me; but says that he is not going to interfere in the smallest degree. I expect the change will come when Parliament meets, as he says the House of Commons will not stand his continuing to be Foreign Secretary while he never appears, and I expect that he will exchange offices with me then."

This proved correct. Mr. Balfour left the Foreign Office in October, and on the 24th of that month Lord Curzon was installed in his place. Congratulations poured in upon him.

"You have, if I may say so," wrote one who had for long been in intimate association with him, "certain capital and essential qualities, too rarely found combined, yet each and all of which are peculiarly desirable in the holder of such a position. They are conscience, intellect, information, experience, as static qualities; the habit of diligence, and the gift of expression with tongue and pen as dynamic qualities. More, I think, may be done by one man just now as Secretary of Foreign Affairs than as Prime Minister."[1]

In the Foreign Office itself and in the ranks of the Diplomatic service his regime during the months of his acting appointment had created a favourable impression and had given rise to great expectations. "I have always kept in close touch with my former colleagues in the Diplomatic Service," Major Baird informed him, "and I can tell you—what they cannot—how anxiously they hoped that your temporary control of Foreign Affairs would become permanent. What they have appreciated particularly during the past months has been that they have felt that they were serving under a Minister who not only took decisions, but himself controlled our Foreign policy."[2]

[1] Letter from Sir Herbert Warren, October 30th, 1919.
[2] Letter from Major Baird, afterwards Lord Stonehaven, Governor General of Australia, dated October 26th, 1919.

Had it been possible to write this of him at the end as at the beginning of his career as Foreign Minister, British history during the next few years might well have been written differently, and the closing years of Lord Curzon's life would not have been marred by the element of tragedy which cast its shadow over them.

But the turn which events were to take was not yet apparent, and during these months of officiating service Lord Curzon had undoubtedly made his personality felt. His conception of the importance and dignity of the office was illustrated by one of the many stories—some wholly apocryphal, others with a substratum of fact to sustain them—which were current about him. On sitting down at the desk in the Secretary of State's room for the first time, his roving eye was caught—and held—by the unobtrusive, if inoffensive, inkpot modestly inviting the first dip of his pen. Lord Curzon rang the bell. "Is this the inkpot used by previous Secretaries of State?" he asked of the expectant official who answered his summons. He was assured that it was. "But," exclaimed Lord Curzon indignantly, "his inkpot should be of crystal and silver, not glass and brass!" Be the story fact or fiction, it is the case that Lord Curzon did cause to be transferred to the Foreign Office one of the inkpots presented to the Privy Council by Queen Anne.

There came a day when the demands which the Foreign Secretary made upon those who served under him earned for him the disapprobation rather than the applause of the officials of the Department. But that was not yet. At this time, though he always insisted upon the highest possible standard of industry and efficiency being maintained, Lord Curzon was not altogether indifferent to the convenience of his subordinates. He admitted, in conversation with one who served under him during the war, that he doubted if Ministers ever really appreciated what they owed to the Civil Service. "We are not half grateful enough for what they do," he said. "We expect them to be always on the spot, always cheerful and attentive, at the very time when they may be having all sorts of troubles of their own; domestic worries; financial anxieties; ill-health."[1] And Mr. Clement Jones, when writing to offer his

[1] In conversation with Mr. Clement Jones, C.B., on December the 21st 1918.

good wishes to Lord Curzon on his appointment', declared that among the large number of those who would be congratulating the Foreign Office on its good fortune none would be more pleased than the Foreign Office staff—" Of this I am convinced, not from hearsay or because I have read it in the papers, but because all my friends in the Foreign Office have told me so. One of them, who has never even been inside your room, told me only the other day what an immense change has come into the whole spirit of the place since January last." If the task which lay before the new Secretary of State was a formidable one, the auspices under which he embarked upon it were, at any rate, favourable.