CHAPTER XIX

THE FALL OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

1922

ALTHOUGH the receipt of General Harington's telegram on October the 1st had eased the tension of the situation, the breach in the Cabinet remained. Among some, at least, of the Conservative members there was genuine alarm, and in his letter of October the 2nd, Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen spoke for others besides himself:

> "I am greatly alarmed at the situation generally, the terrible risks of war which some of our friends appear prepared to take and their distrust of diplomatic methods. . . I am certain the country does not want war and will not have it, unless it is convinced that every effort to avoid it has been made."

And neither Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, nor Mr. Stanley Baldwin nor others who shared their views, were prepared to acquiesce in action by the Cabinet which they thought might bring about a rupture. They, therefore, approached Lord Curzon with a request that they might meet together at his house to discuss their action as occasion might require, and they gave him definite assurances that from this time onwards they were prepared to associate themselves with him and to join him in resigning if the necessity arose. And it was from the feverish happenings of this troubled week-end that Lord Curzon himself dated the first definite appearance of the crack which in the end split the Coalition Govern-

ment asunder. "When a group of Cabinet Ministers begin to meet separately and to discuss independent action," he jotted down on a sheet of paper, "the death tick is audible in the rafters."

A good deal was to happen, however, before the final crash came. Mr. Lloyd George's resignation did not take place until October the 19th, and before that date the situation underwent constant change.

At Mudania where, in accordance with the Paris decision, the Generals in command of the Allied forces were in conference with a view to determining lines behind which the troops of the belligerents should be withdrawn, an agreement, known as the Convention of Mudania, had been arrived at and had been handed to the Turks. The latter had thereupon raised a number of important issues lying altogether beyond the scope of the negotiations with which the Generals had been entrusted. Among other things they had demanded that there should at once be handed over to them that part of Eastern Thrace from which it had been agreed under the terms of the Convention that the Greek forces should withdraw, thus prejudging one of the major issues with which the impending Peace Conference would be concerned.

Instead of joining General Harington in refusing to consider any such demand, General Charpy, acting upon authority transmitted to him from Paris, had declared his agreement with all the requests put forward by the Turks. And, encouraged by this support, Ismet Pasha had announced on behalf of the Government at Angora that, unless the demands were immediately conceded, he would at 2 p.m. on October the 6th, set the Turkish Army in motion. General Harington had thereupon left Mudania for Constantinople. And, with the unity of the Allies sundered once more by conflicting aims and divided counsels, there arose before Lord Curzon's troubled eyes, limned in flaming outline against the storm-wracked sky of Eastern Europe, the now familiar vision of "the horse that was red" to whose rider had been given, on the opening of the second seal of the book, a great sword and power to take peace from the earth.

Nothing short of an immediate restoration of the Allied front seemed likely to save the situation, and for the second time within a

fortnight Lord Curzon hurried to Paris. So urgent did the matter seem to him to be that, late though the hour was, he persuaded M. Poincaré to confer with him immediately after his arrival; and from 11 p.m. on October the 6th until 3 a.m. on the 7th he argued the case with the French Premier and with Signor Galli who attended on behalf of Italy. It was not until far into the night that the discovery was made that M. Poincaré was not in possession of the full demands which the Turks had put forward—demands which General Charpy, acting upon the general authorisation which M. Poincaré had given him to assume any attitude towards Turkey which he might deem necessary to avoid a rupture, had announced his intention of accepting. From the moment that this discovery was made, the whole tone of the discussion changed and the hope of agreement dawned. At the conclusion of two more sittings on the 7th, a formula embodying a compromise on the question of the proposed Turkish occupation of Eastern Thrace was arrived at, all other demands being rejected.

It was agreed in short that, on the withdrawal of the Greek forces behind the line of the Maritza, Eastern Thrace should for a period of one month be occupied by the Allies; that this period should be taken advantage of to set up a Turkish civil administration with a limited number of gendarmerie for the purpose of maintaining order; and that at the end of the month the Allied troops should be withdrawn, except from certain points on the right bank of the river, to the positions which they occupied at the time of the Mudania Conference. Agreement having thus been reached, General Charpy was instructed by M. Poincaré to press this decision upon the Turkish representative at Mudania.

Lord Curzon returned to London on Sunday the 8th, elated at the successful outcome of his difficult mission. For the second time within a few days, he was acclaimed in the Press as the man who had saved the country from war and re-established the solidarity of the Alliance. And the volume of praise with which his return was greeted was not confined to the Press, for at the conclusion of his report to the Cabinet on the afternoon of Monday the 9th, a formal expression of appreciation of the important services rendered by him in Paris was once more placed on record.

It was not only with these troubles in the arena of international affairs, however, that Ministers were preoccupied at this time. For some days past the desirability of an early dissolution had been discussed by leading members of the Government. The revolt in the ranks of the Conservative party against the leadership of Mr. Lloyd George which had disclosed itself at the beginning of the year had not been extinguished. If the fire had died down after the action of Sir George Younger, to which reference has been made in the previous chapter, the feelings of dissatisfaction with which it had been fed still smouldered, and might break into flame at any moment. A meeting of the National Union of Conservative Associations had been called for November the 13th; and it was to consider whether it would be fair to the Conservative party to bring on a General Election before that date that Mr. Winston Churchill invited the Prime Minister and leading Unionist members of the Cabinet, including Lord Curzon, to dinner at his house. That Lord Curzon's relations with the Prime Minister and others of his colleagues in the Cabinet were strained must be clear from the narrative of events which has been given. On the other hand, with his highly-strung emotional temperament, he was not proof against the subtle flattery implied by the formal recognition of his achievements by the Cabinet in connection with his Paris negotiations; and by the end of the evening a decision had been reached, with which Lord Curzon had expressed his concurrence, in favour of an appeal to the country before November the 13th.

How, then, is his subsequent action to be explained? To anyone who has followed the story of George Curzon's life as I have traced it through its various crises, the explanation should not be difficult to find. The case is one which is on an exact par with that of the Constitutional crisis of 1911 and of the Woman Suffrage difficulty of 1918—a decision arrived at on the impulse of the moment, followed on reflection by a realisation that the decision was not in accord with his real feelings on the matter at issue, and an eleventh hour determination to reverse it. Moreover, everything that happened after this first dinner at Mr. Churchill's house—there was to be a second as will appear hereafter—combined to bring home to Lord Curzon a conviction that in consenting to an immediate

dissolution with a view to an appeal by the Coalition for a fresh lease of power, he had been wrong.

Following upon the dinner party at Mr. Churchill's house, a meeting of the Conservative members of the Cabinet was held at 11 Downing Street at Mr. Chamberlain's invitation on Thursday, October the 12th. The feeling of discontent which was prevalent amongst the rank and file of the party was forcibly expressed by more than one of those present, and notably by Mr. Stanley Baldwin. Lord Curzon himself submitted arguments against an immediate General Election, pointing out that, as a result of the re-establishment of the Allied front, preparations were now actively in progress for the impending Peace Conference; and that the British case would be seriously impaired if, as the result of an Election, the threads of exceedingly complicated and difficult negotiations had to be picked up on the very threshold of the Conference Chamber by a new Foreign Minister. He added that, even supposing an Election resulted in no change in the personnel of the British delegation, the dislocation, inevitable with a General Election in full swing, would prejudice the progress of the preparations which were in hand and would necessitate some postponement of the Conference which M. Poincaré was anxious to see summoned at the earliest possible date. The meeting broke up without any decision being come to.

It was not long, however, before further information reached him to the effect that feeling amongst Conservatives generally was so strongly against an immediate dissolution, which was regarded as a trick to snatch a verdict in favour of a continuance of the Coalition behind their backs, that it had been decided to summon an emergency meeting of the National Union in order to forestall the anticipated action of the Cabinet. And it was while in a state of considerable mental perturbation as a result of these things that he found himself brought into sharp collision with Mr. Lloyd George once more.

On the morning of Friday the 13th, a little group of Ministers including Lord Curzon were talking in the Cabinet room at the conclusion of a conference, when the Prime Minister came in fresh from an interview with the King. From a written account of these events kept by Lord Curzon it appears that Mr. Lloyd George was in

"the highest spirits and the most bellicose mood." In a few boisterous sentences he indicated to those present some of the things that he intended to say in his speech at Manchester the following day, including a graphic reference to atrocities perpetrated by the Turks. For obvious reasons Lord Curzon begged him to avoid all reference to this subject. Mr. Lloyd George was not to be restrained. And on the following Sunday morning Lord Curzon read his speech with stupefaction and dismay.

It is easy to understand Lord Curzon's feelings. On the eve of the Conference at which he, as Foreign Minister of Great Britain, would be charged with the duty of making peace with a victorious Turkish army and an exultant Turkish nation, the Prime Minister of Great Britain had based his entire defence of the recent policy of Great Britain upon a desire to save Constantinople and Thrace from the bloody shambles of a Turkish massacre. And not only had he held up the Turks to execration as the perpetrators of barbarous excesses, but he had publicly derided France for having been false to her pledged word. Finally, Lord Curzon's resentment against the Prime Minister on the score of his interference with the conduct by the Foreign Office of the Foreign Policy of the Government, was suddenly reignited by information, which reached him on the very day on which Mr. Lloyd George was speaking at Manchester, of a series of communications between an Italian Envoy and the Prime Minister's private secretariat on the subject of the attitude to be adopted by the Italian delegate at the Peace Conference, in the course of which the bases of a possible bargain between Italy and Great Britain were tentatively put forward.

Only a few days before, in a letter addressed to the Prime Minister on October the 2nd, Lord Curzon had protested against such conversations between the Envoys of Foreign Governments and the Prime Minister, without the knowledge of the Foreign Secretary, even when the substance of the conversation was subsequently reported:

> "I have just been reading the acount of your talk with M. Diamandy. I hope you will not mind my saying that I think that the Foreign Secretary should have had a chance of

being present, and that if, as you foreshadow, the conversation is renewed, you will give me that opportunity. The Foreign Office is placed in a very invidious position if these Envoys are given access to the Prime Minister without the Foreign Office knowing anything about it. I am quite ready to admit that you state the case far better than we should. But if the Rumanian Government desires to express its views to the British Government, either it should do so through the ordinary channel, or, if you honour it by seeing the Envoy, then we should, I submit, be given the chance of being represented. I am sure that you will not resent the frankness with which I have spoken."

And, following upon his letter to Mr. Lloyd George on the subject of his conversation with the Rumanian Envoy, Lord Curzon had drafted, on the eve of his second journey to Paris, a longer and more detailed letter of protest which he had intended, after first submitting it to Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Balfour for their opinion, to despatch to the Prime Minister preparatory to asking for an interview to discuss the position. The letter was actually submitted to Mr. Chamberlain, who returned it with the suggestion that before sending it Lord Curzon should discuss it with Lord Balfour. The letter was, in fact, never sent because, as has been explained in an earlier chapter, before he had found an opportunity of discussing it with Lord Balfour, the crash came and Mr. Lloyd George's Government fell. The letter is, however, of interest, because it explains Lord Curzon's state of mind at a time when he was being called upon to decide whether he could continue his support of the Coalition with Mr. Lloyd George at its head, or whether he should definitely sever his connection with it. The draft is dated October the 5th and runs as follows:

"My dear Prime Minister,

I wrote to you two days ago about your personal talk with M. Diamandy, the Rumanian Envoy."

Then follows a statement with regard to other instances of communications which had taken place between the Prime Minister and

the representatives of Foreign Governments, the gist of which seemed to Lord Curzon to run counter to the policy being pursued by the Foreign Office, after which the draft proceeds :

" Thus there has grown up a system under which there are in reality two Foreign Offices: the one for which I am for the time being responsible, and the other at Number 10—with the essential difference between them that, whereas I report not only to you but to all my colleagues everything that I say or do, every telegram that I receive or send, every communication of importance that reaches me, it is often only by accident that I hear what is being done by the other Foreign Office ; and even when I am informed officially of what has passed there, it has nevertheless been done, in many cases, without the Foreign Office, for which I am responsible, knowing that the communication was going to be made or the interview take place.

" This condition of affairs has reached such a pitch that not only is it a subject of common knowledge and daily comment in my office, but it is known to every journalist in London, and it has been the subject of open complaints and censure in well-nigh every newspaper in the United Kingdom, the Foreign Office and myself in particular having been held up to contempt for having abdicated our functions, or allowed them to be stolen away. There cannot be a doubt that public opinion has not merely condemned this procedure as unconstitutional and improper, but has clamoured without a dissentient voice for its cessation. In this way there has grown up a situation which has for long rendered my own position one of extreme delicacy and difficulty, and to which, in the common interest, an end should be sought.

" During this period—I have now been Secretary of State for three years, and I was acting for the best part of a year before—I have borne this situation with such equanimity as I could. I have on several occasions mentioned it or written about it to you. I have repeatedly mentioned it to your Private Secretaries. I have discussed it at length with my principal colleagues. Throughout I have gladly recognised the exceptional

and commanding influence which you exercise over the Foreign Affairs both of this country and of the world, by virtue of your personality and of the power which your unexampled experience in Conferences and Councils during and since the war has very naturally placed in your hands ; and I have constantly deferred from making more serious representations in the interests of loyalty to yourself and unity in the Government.

"But the case has not been confined even to a long series of such minor incidents as those to which I have referred at the beginning of this letter. I could, if required, draw up a list of important cases in which agents have been employed, instructions given, policies initiated at Number 10 Downing Street—all in the Department of Foreign Affairs—of which the Foreign Office has either known nothing or has been informed only when the action had already been taken.

"I have for long felt that such a situation should not be permitted to continue, and that, if it were not checked, you ought to have a Foreign Secretary who will more easily than I conform to this novel conception of Foreign Office duties. Indeed, I should find no pleasure in continuing now, were I not to receive a definite assurance from you that the constitutional relations between the two Departments should be re-established and the Foreign Office shall resume its proper function in the State.

"Pray believe me that this resolve on my part indicates no desire to question the prerogative or the paramount influence of the Prime Minister in general or of yourself in particular. These are undisputed and indisputable, and, with due co-ordination, can be wielded as effectively in the domain of Foreign Affairs as in every other Department of Government.

"I have discussed this matter at length with Chamberlain and at earlier dates with Balfour ; and I shall be ready to come with the former and see you upon it at any time which you may desire. I could also, if it were found necessary, draw up the fuller statement, for which I have the materials."

The state of affairs depicted in this draft had, as Lord Curzon

remarked, become a matter of public notoriety and had even been exciting a steadily increasing volume of hostile comment. And when Lord Gladstone declared, in the course of a speech at Manchester on October the 3rd, that in the last few years we had developed two Foreign Offices, one on the south side of Downing Street and the other on the north, the latter being in the Prime Minister's garden, he was only voicing a widely prevalent opinion. Speaking at Dumfries three days later, Mr. Asquith had commented with similar outspokenness upon "the substitution for our old and well tried constitutional procedure of the improvisations of an intermittent and incalculable dictatorship." And with special reference to the conduct of Foreign Affairs he had said—

> "You have had during these last few years in the same sphere of administration two authorities speaking with different voices, often pursuing discrepant and irreconcilable policies, often with the result that the one that knows less in the long run supersedes and overrides the one that knows more."

It was the cumulative effect of all these things, then, that brought about the change in Lord Curzon's attitude which was subsequently characterised by Mr. Churchill as "sudden and nimble," but which Lord Curzon himself described as "slow and perhaps even belated."[1]

During the opening days of October the agitation in the ranks of the Conservative party had become a factor which it was impossible to ignore, and those who had agreed to an immediate dissolution were invited by Mr. Churchill to a second dinner at his house on Sunday, October the 15th, to consider the position in light of it. But by October the 15th Mr. Lloyd George had made his speech at Manchester, and news of his communications with the Italian Envoy had reached Lord Curzon, and on the 15th, therefore, his mind was finally made up. He could no longer agree to an immediate appeal to the country in which the Coalition including himself were to appear before the electors as "a happy and united party." Nor, in these circumstances, did he feel able to attend the dinner party at

[1] In the *Morning Post* of November 10th, 1922.

Mr. Churchill's house that night. Those with whom he had been acting must be informed of his change of view and of the reasons for it, and to this end he asked Mr. Chamberlain as leader of the Unionist party to see him in the course of the afternoon. Having told him of the attitude which he now felt bound to take up, he then wrote to Mr. Churchill excusing himself from attending the party in the evening and adding that Mr. Chamberlain was in possession of the reasons for his altered point of view and would explain them to the gathering.

Four more days were to elapse before the final *dénouement*. And though Lord Curzon was, of course, invited to no further conferences of the Coalition leaders, he found them packed with incident. On Monday the 16th, he saw Mr. Chamberlain and learned that at the dinner on the previous night it had been decided to call a meeting of Unionist members of the House of Commons to be held at the Carlton Club on Thursday the 19th. At the meeting a programme was to be submitted and an expression of confidence in Mr. Chamberlain's leadership invited.

On Tuesday the 17th he went at the Prime Minister's request to see him; and now at last he found the opportunity which he had long sought of placing before him in detail the grounds of his dissatisfaction. For an hour and twenty minutes these two men faced each other—the one determined to bring to an end a state of affairs which had become intolerable; the other employing every art, and displaying an agility which extorted unwilling admiration, in turning the attack levelled against him. Since no third person was present to take a note of all that passed, no detailed account of this moving interview can be given. But it is, perhaps, permissible to make public Lord Curzon's own written account of the last few minutes of it:

> "In moving sentences and in a voice charged with emotion he (the Prime Minister) asked me not to forget the great scenes in which we had jointly taken part and the common comradeship of the war, and thanked me for the loyalty which I had consistently shown both in speech and action to him. I could not, or at least I did not, question the sincerity of these

utterances, sharply as they contrasted with the treatment I had so often received at his hands. They enabled us to part in the most friendly fashion. I said that he was aware that my resignation was in his hands and that he could act upon it when he chose, to which he replied with unconscious gift of prophecy—'as I shall probably be resigning myself on Thursday we had better postpone a decision till then.'"[1]

Wednesday, October the 18th, was not to pass without adding a contribution of its own to the sensations of these eventful days. In the morning Lord Curzon saw Mr. Bonar Law. He found him depressed and worried by the appeals which were being made to him to thrust himself once more into the forefront of public life. He had now been free for the past eighteen months from the almost intolerable strain of office, and he shrank from the prospect of resuming a burden which he had found all too heavy to bear. From many quarters he had received assurances that, if he came out at the Carlton Club meeting with a definite appeal to the party to sever their connection with the Coalition, he would receive sufficient support to enable him to carry the day. But that, as he pointed out to Lord Curzon, would almost necessarily impose upon him the duty of forming a Government himself—and for such a task he had no appetite. So distasteful was the prospect, that Lord Curzon left him thinking seriously of resigning his seat in the House of Commons and retiring finally from public life.

Upon what small vicissitudes do great events revolve! I do not pretend to know what happened during the next few hours to turn the scale. And the only comment that I can usefully make is that, contrary, perhaps, to the generally accepted view, Mr. Bonar Law was an extremely ambitious man. This, however, is surmise. All that is certain is that the scale turned. Later in the day Lord Curzon saw him again, and has left on record an account of this second meeting—

"In the evening when I saw him again all had changed. His mind had been made up. He had resolved or been per-

[1] From a personal *aide-mémoire* written by Lord Curzon some time in October 1922.

suaded to assume the lead, and he even gave me the substance of the speech which he proposed to make on the morrow. We discussed whether I ought to be present or not. In any case I said I would not speak against my colleagues and should insist on maintaining silence. But when he declared that this would be impossible, and that I could not escape being called upon, I decided with his concurrence that out of loyalty to Chamberlain I had better stay away, and that I should excuse myself on the very legitimate ground—about which I felt strongly—that as Leader of the House of Lords I had no business to appear at, or to address, a meeting from which the peers had been excluded and which was confined—except for Ministers—to the House of Commons. No peers had been invited to the Carlton Club meeting of Unionist M.P.s which had elected Chamberlain Leader of the party, and none, in my view, had any right to be present at a meeting which would either confirm or revoke that choice."

The meeting duly took place at the Carlton Club on the morning of Thursday, October the 19th. Mr. Bonar Law's intervention was, undoubtedly, the decisive factor; and from the moment that he declared—on Mr. Chamberlain refusing to defer a decision until after the meeting of the National Union—that in that case he attached more importance to preserving the unity of the party than to winning the next Election, the doom of the Coalition was sealed.

On receipt of news of the decision of the Carlton Club meeting Mr. Lloyd George resigned; Mr. Bonar Law was summoned to Buckingham Palace; and, later the same day, he called on Lord Curzon and invited him to remain at the Foreign Office and to render him such aid as lay in his power in forming an Administration.

Thus came to an end the Coalition Government. Mr. Bonar Law was elected Leader of the Unionist party in Mr. Chamberlain's place; the dissolution of Parliament took place on October the 26th; the General Election followed; and, as a result of the polling which was held on November the 15th, 344 officially recognised Unionists were returned giving Mr. Bonar Law a majority of 73 over all other parties combined.