CHAPTER II

RETURN TO PUBLIC LIFE

1907-1908

DEPRIVED for the time being of the opportunity of entering Parliament, Lord Curzon cast about for work of public usefulness which would give him the occupation without which life became intolerable. He was fortunate that at this time of enforced leisure the Chancellorship of Oxford University fell vacant. The post was one in connection with which his name had been mentioned while still in India. But though it was one which possessed great attraction for him he realised that to allow his name to be put forward while still abroad would be a mistake; and he had dismissed the matter from his mind. When, therefore, on the death of Lord Goschen in 1907, the post again fell vacant, he eagerly seized the chance of becoming a candidate for it.

His selection as Chancellor appeared to be assured, when an unwonted interest was given to the matter by an unexpected announcement that there was to be a contest, and that the rival candidate would be no less a person than Lord Rosebery. The result as it turned out was never in doubt, for Lord Curzon was elected by 1,001 votes to 440; after which the University dismissed the matter from mind with the comfortable reflection that it had been, after all, a case of much ado about nothing. It was recalled that from the 15th century, when the active duties of the office had been taken over by the Vice-Chancellor, the Chancellor had become a figure-head whose existence was scarcely remembered except at his first Encænia, when it was customary for him to appear in a

special gown all glorious with gold, to confer honorary degrees on distinguished men selected for the honour by himself.

It was, perhaps, the reflection that to treat any office which he held as a sinecure was not exactly Lord Curzon's way, that led to second thoughts of a somewhat different nature. The powers of the Chancellor, it was now remembered, though latent were not lost. It was even legally possible for a Chancellor to reside at Oxford and to play an important part in the government of the University. And from some points of view a Chancellor bent on reform from within might be preferable to a Royal Commission imposed on the University from without. Such ideas spread quickly and before many days were over there were people who began to wonder whether the new Chancellor might not display his well known energy by coming to live in Oxford and assuming direction of the University's affairs. It is true that the probability of this happening seemed scarcely great enough seriously to alarm the reactionary party in the University; though it was also not so small as altogether to deprive the party of reform of hope. How quickly—when the necessity for doing so arose—opinion in University circles accommodated itself to the idea of an active Chancellor is clear from a letter written by Lord Curzon himself within a few months of his election to the post—

> "The Oxford Chancellorship I find a great responsibility. First there is the Oxford Appeal which I have headed and to which"—here came a typical touch—"any contribution from you of £100, or upwards, will be warmly welcome. Then we have to reform ourselves in order to escape a Royal Commission, and it appears to be generally conceded that it is my duty to initiate and organise the reform. But to reform a University is like reconstituting a Church? . . "[1]

But the story of the ability and zeal with which Lord Curzon threw himself into the discharge of his high academic duties and of the ultimate advantage accruing to Oxford therefrom, is told with intimate knowledge by Sir Herbert Warren; and it is to

[1] Letter to Lord Selborne dated August 9th, 1907.

chapter VI, consequently, that the reader interested in Lord Curzon's activities in this new sphere of public work is invited to refer.

So formidable a task as that upon which Lord Curzon had now embarked at Oxford would have been sufficient in itself to fill the time and tax the energies of most men. It did not, however, prevent him from chafing at the fate which still barred the way to his return to active political life. Events of the utmost importance were taking place in the very sphere in which his own especial interests lay. As regarded India, Mr. Morley, in spite of his bold words on the eve of the Election, had found on taking charge at the India Office that it was one thing to talk about reversing the policy of your predecessor while out of office, but quite another thing to do so when actually in a position to translate your words into action. Mr. Morley had, indeed, made use of very strong language while he was still in opposition. With the sanction of the Secretary of State, he said, Lord Curzon had been chased out of power by the military. "I hope," he told those whom he was addressing, "you are fully alive to this. If there is one principle more than another that has been accepted in this country since the day when Charles I lost his head, it is this—that the Civil Power shall be supreme over the military Power." Yet the India Office had been guilty of this great departure "from those standard maxims of public administration which have been practically sacred in this island ever since the days of the Civil War."[1] And there is no doubt that when a few weeks later Mr. Morley found himself in charge of matters at the India Office, it was his intention to effect important changes in the system of military administration which had been imposed upon the Government of India by Mr. Balfour's Government.

But Mr. Morley soon found that circumstances had changed. In place of Lord Curzon there was now in India a Viceroy who had accepted office with the knowledge that his first great task would be to give effect to the scheme laid down in the Despatch of May the 31st, 1905, and who had immediately set to work to draw up the necessary rules. His draft of them had actually reached Mr. Morley in the middle of the Election when he was far too fully occupied

[1] Speech at Arbroath in October, 1905.

to give a thought to it, and he had referred the matter to a Committee at the India Office pending his own return to London.

This, then, was the position with which Mr. Morley found himself confronted when he settled down at the India Office—in India a Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief at one with his own Council in Whitehall on the question at issue. Could he, a Secretary of State of a few days standing only, overrule this formidable combination of authorities? He came quickly to the conclusion that he could not. There was, however, one straw at which he grasped—not a very substantial one but still something to lay hold of. On the question of the position and powers of the Secretary to the Government of India in the new Army Department, that Government were themselves divided. Mr. Morley sided with the dissentients against the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, and took credit to himself for placing the new Secretary in as independent a position as a written rule could give him. He did not imagine that this would altogether satisfy Lord Curzon, but he shrugged his shoulders and explained the circumstances which in his view had altered the case. He admitted that he did not regard his scheme as one which was likely to last. He thought that it would probably have to be reconsidered when Lord Kitchener left India; but he was strongly of opinion that even a provisional, tentative and dubious scheme was better than an indefinite prolongation of the controversy.[1]

Lord Curzon at once realised that the new Secretary of State had found discretion the better part of valour. He attached little value to the latter's vaunted safeguard against a military dictatorship provided by the Secretary to the Government of India in the Army Department. But, debarred from calling attention to the matter in Parliament, he had little hope of gaining the public ear. The correspondence columns of the press provided him with his only means of bringing the matter to the notice of the public, and, oppressed with the feeling that he would be untrue to India if he remained silent in face of the latest scene in what appeared to him to have been "a drama of supreme political unwisdom," he set forth his case in a letter of more than two columns in *The Times*.

[1] Letter from Mr. Morley to Lord Curzon, dated February 7th, 1906.

But all who were genuinely interested in the controversy, on whichever side of it their opinions lay, had long since made up their minds upon the question, while it was of far too technical a character in its details to enlist the interest of the general reader. And Mr. Morley had proved a true prophet when he had told Lord Curzon before the publication of his Despatch, that, whatever the merits or demerits of his decision, he had not the smallest doubt that when Parliament met the strongly prevalent opinion would be in favour of the storm being abated.

The Government's decision on the question of Indian Military Administration was not the only one of special interest to Lord Curzon that came to the fore during the early days of Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman's Administration. During the summer of 1907 it became known that His Majesty's Government had arrived at an agreement with the Russian Government defining their respective interests in those regions which lay between the frontiers of India and of the Tsar's dominions in Central Asia. A Convention was in fact signed at St. Petersburg on August the 31st, and was ratified on September the 23rd. Lord Curzon's opinion of it was quickly formed.

> "The Russian Convention," he wrote on September the 25th, "is in my view deplorable. It gives up all that we have been fighting for for years, and gives it up with a wholesale abandon that is truly cynical in its recklessness. Ah, me, it makes one despair of public life. The efforts of a century sacrificed and nothing or next to nothing in return." When Parliament meets there ought to be, but I suppose will not be, a demonstration in force."[1]

That part of the Agreement which defined the spheres of interest of Great Britain and Russia in Persia certainly bore some resemblance to the plan which he had once described in a letter to the same correspondent as "a compartment system," consisting of alternate blocks of interest—a plan which being of the nature of patchwork would be likely to go the way of all patchwork quilts.[2] At anyrate it definitely recognised a large central block of Persian territory

[1] Letter to Lord Percy.

[2] Vol. II, ch. XXV.

lying between a Russian block on the north-west and a British block on the south-east and running down to the waters of the Persian Gulf, in which Great Britain undertook not to oppose the grant to Russian subjects of any concessions whatever, and thus threw overboard the claim which Lord Curzon had constantly put forward that Great Britain should tolerate no advance of Russian influence anywhere in Southern Persia, still less anywhere in the neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf.'

Here, then, was a question of first class importance upon which Lord Curzon was specially qualified to speak, and which was bound to be debated in the two Houses of Parliament, from both of which he was excluded. The question of a peerage for him consequently became acute.

Looking back from this distance of time upon the curiously chequered history of his efforts, first to escape from, and later to enter, the House of Lords, it is impossible not to see in it a certain element of comedy. The story of the strenuous though unavailing efforts which he made during the early years of his own Parliamentary life to guard against an enforced translation to the House of Lords on the death of Lord Scarsdale, has been told in Volume I. Service in India had tempered, though it had not wholly removed, his dislike of this prospect; and when, during his holiday in England in 1904, the question of his being offered a peerage on his return had been mooted, he had not definitely rejected the proposal. The difference with the Cabinet which had resulted in his resignation had altered the position so far as the Conservative Government were concerned. Lord Curzon, bitterly resentful of his treatment at their hands, was in no mood to accept any honour on their recommendation; and the Prime Minister, conscious of the reception which any such offer on his part was destined to meet with, very naturally refrained from making one. Lord Curzon aware of the opinion of King Edward that, as one who had been Viceroy, it was fitting that he should sit in the Upper Chamber rather than in the House of Commons, and basing his opinion on recent precedents, felt confident that no difficulty in securing the peerage which he was now as vehemently anxious to obtain as he had formerly been to avoid, was to be anticipated on the score of

the political complexion of the Government which had come into power at the close of Mr. Balfour's Administration.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, however, took a different view. He did not see his way to recommending for a peerage a public servant whose claims to that distinction had been rejected—or at any rate ignored—by a Conservative Prime Minister under whose Administration his service had been rendered. Hence the unhappy comedy—the Sovereign anxious to confer a peerage upon a great public servant of the value of whose service he held a genuinely high opinion, but unwilling to overstep the bounds of constitutional propriety by pressing his wishes in face of the deliberate silence of his constitutional advisers; a Conservative Prime Minister willing on the merits of the case to make the necessary recommendation but restrained from doing so by his knowledge that the offer coming from him would be rejected; a Radical Prime-Minister, not over anxious, we may suppose, to step out of his way to facilitate the return to Parliamentary life of so doughty an opponent, standing on the strict letter of constitutional practice and refusing to rush in where his predecessor had feared to tread; and finally the irritated victim of this fortuitous combination of circumstances naturally, though it must be admitted illogically, angry—when he became aware of the grounds on which Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman refused to move—with Mr. Balfour for having refrained from offering him something which he had been determined to refuse.

In later years the drama which had begun as light comedy in the opening years of his Parliamentary life and had passed on into more serious comedy on his return from India, ended on a note of tragedy. The long deferred Earldom was conferred by King George in November 1911; and in 1921 Lord Curzon, who had then been Leader of the House of Lords for four years, a member of the War Cabinet and Foreign Secretary, became a Marquess. Yet by the irony of fate it was his membership of the Upper House which he had at one time striven so strenuously to escape and which he had subsequently found so difficult of attainment, that was held to disqualify him from filling the highest office in public life to which, through all the vicissitudes of a long and strenuous career, it had been his steadily cherished ambition to attain.

In 1907, however, this *dénouement* was unforeseen; and the problem of the moment was how to give effect to his desire to return to political life. A possible solution was first suggested to him by Lord Lansdowne. The sudden death of Lord Kilmaine in the autumn of 1907 created a vacancy in the Irish representative peerage. On his appointment to the Viceroyalty, Lord Curzon had accepted an Irish peerage with a view to returning to the House of Commons. But as an Irish peer he was equally eligible for election to the House of Lords, and, provided that he commended himself to the members of this small and specialised electorate, there appeared to be no reason why he should not become a candidate for the vacancy. He was assured of the support of some at least of the more prominent of the Irish peers; but the body as a whole was always resentful of anything that savoured of dictation, and the hope that was cherished in some quarters that if Lord Curzon's name was put forward he might be returned unopposed, was doomed to disappointment.

From the point of view of the average voter, Lord Curzon's candidature was not, indeed, an ideal one. To begin with, an Irish peer when once elected to represent his fellow peers, remained their representative for life. No vacancy was created in the event of his succeeding to an English peerage, and only on his death could his place be filled. What, it was asked, would become of their special representation when in due course Lord Curzon succeeded to the English peerage to which he was the heir? Moreover the questions in which they expected their representatives to take particular interest were purely Irish questions—the wrongs of the Irish landlords and of the oppressed minority in Ireland generally. They may well have thought that even if he sat as a representative Irish peer, Lord Curzon would scarcely be likely to handle such matters in quite the same spirit as would a man who was familiar with them from personal and, often enough, bitter experience. Still less was this to be expected when in due course he succeeded to an English peerage. Lord Curzon himself was not indifferent to these considerations and in the Address in which he set forth his reasons for seeking their support he explained his position with perfect candour. He was unfortunately debarred, he said, from

entering the House of Lords in what might be regarded as the more ordinary way, by the refusal of the Prime Minister to allow him to take his place with all the other ex-Viceroys of India upon its benches. He readily admitted that there were many considerations which might induce them to prefer a peer directly connected with Ireland. At the same time he had been given to understand that his return to public life through the only channel which now appeared to be open to him, might be viewed with favour by those concerned.

Two other candidates went to the poll; and when the voting closed in January 1908, it was found that Lord Curzon had been elected by a majority of two votes over his nearest competitor who, in his turn, was only the same number of votes in front of the third candidate on the list.

When writing to Lord Lansdowne to thank him for the help which he had given him he added—"I propose on a very early day to call attention to the Anglo-Russian Agreement and to make a speech upon it. My views are unfavourable. But I shall express them with reasonable moderation and shall criticise not the policy or the principle involved, but only the nature of the bargain made. I cannot, of course, remain silent having devoted my whole working life to the subject."[1]

The opportunity which he sought occurred on February the 6th, when he rose to move for papers in connection with the Convention. He followed closely the lines which he had indicated in his letter to Lord Lansdowne. He admitted that he was in favour of a policy of understandings and alliances rather than of continued isolation—"a splendid but sometimes precarious and possibly even dangerous isolation." But there was a limit to the price which we ought to pay for such understandings and alliances. And he proceeded to show, with the remorseless logic which his intimate knowledge of the details of the arrangement enabled him to command, that the bargain was one in the making of which we had been hopelessly outmanœuvred by our astute opponents.

The sphere of influence which we had assigned to Russia embraced eleven out of the twelve cities that in the whole of Persia could

[1] Letter dated January 23rd, 1908.

boast a population of more than 30,000, and seven out of the eleven recognised trade routes; the sphere which we had been content to accept for ourselves, one such city and a solitary trade route. While attaching supreme importance to strategical considerations, we had altogether lost sight of our immediate commercial, political, economic and telegraphic interests.

> "I have been reluctantly driven to the conclusion," he declared, "that whatever may be the ultimate effects produced, we have thrown away to a large extent the efforts of our diplomacy and our trade for more than a century; and I do not feel at all sure that this Treaty in its Persian aspect will conduce either to the security of India, to the independence of Persia or to the peace of Asia."

He thought that in the case of Afghanistan we had obtained nothing in return for the very substantial concessions that we had made; while in the matter of Tibet we had not merely made sacrifices but had been guilty of absolute surrender. He thought the Annex to the Agreement concerning the Chumbi Valley deplorable; all the more so because it placed the seal upon the decision of the late Government overruling the Government of India on the question of the occupation of the valley by Great Britain. The seventy-five years of occupation contemplated by Colonel Younghusband and the Tibetan authorities at Lhasa, and provided for in the Treaty negotiated by the former, had been reduced to three years by the Cabinet in 1904. In the Annex to the Convention of 1907 it was agreed that if, for any reason the occupation was not terminated within the three years, the Government of Great Britain would enter into a friendly exchange of views with the Government of Russia on the subject. It had always been a matter of complaint by Lord Curzon that, when the Government had compiled their Blue Book on the Tibetan question, they had deliberately minimised the part which Russian activity in Tibet had played in determining the Indian Government to press for an active policy; and by so doing had created the false impression that he and his colleagues were urging a policy of adventure for no adequate

reason. Now the successors of Mr. Balfour's Government had actually agreed to talk over the evacuation of a tongue of Tibetan territory, which ran like a wedge into the Indian Empire, with the Government of Russia, whose own borders were not merely many hundreds of miles from the Chumbi Valley but from the nearest frontier of Tibet itself. "The particular Annex as regards the Chumbi Valley," he exclaimed, "unless it is capable of explanation seems to me to be almost a humiliation."

There was one other aspect of the Agreement which he could not refrain from commenting on—the cynical indifference displayed even by a Liberal Government in disposing of other people's property. Had Persia been consulted about the Agreement, he asked?

> "I am almost astounded at the coolness, I might even say the effrontery, with which the British Government is in the habit of parcelling out the territory of Powers, whose independence and integrity it assures them at the same time it has no other intention than to preserve, and only informs the Power concerned of the arrangement that has been made after the Agreement has been concluded."

The criticism was given point by subsequent happenings in connection not with Persia but with Afghanistan. It was stipulated in the Agreement that the provisions affecting that country should only come into force when the assent of the Amir had been received. The Amir showed his displeasure at the effrontery of Great Britain and Russia in arranging for the future of his country behind his back, by ignoring the whole proceedings. And it was eventually found necessary for the contracting parties to agree to regard the provisions of the Afghan section of the Convention as being operative without the Amir's consent—a proceeding which naturally discounted the courtesy towards the Amir intended by the original draft.

The discussion of February the 6th, was, of course, of purely academic interest since the Convention had already been signed and ratified; but it served to signalise Lord Curzon's return to public life.