CHAPTER III

ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL ACTIVITIES WITH AN INTERLUDE

1908-1911

WITH the Conservative party in Opposition Lord Curzon's duties in the House of Lords left him ample leisure. And his aloofness from domestic politics at this time, due in part to his dislike of the Tariff controversy, left him free to turn to those many other interests to which he had always been attracted, and from which, after the close of his career in India, he derived, as he once admitted, far more real pleasure than he did from the ups and downs, the victories and defeats, the achievements and failures of political life. For the next few years, until the unforeseen formation of a Coalition Government brought him for the first time into a British Cabinet, he devoted a large share of his time and energies to interests which ministered to the intellectual and æsthetic cravings of his many-sided personality.

Sir Herbert Warren shows how thoroughly he threw himself into his work as Chancellor of Oxford University. For most men this draught at the academic well might have been expected to suffice; for, as was remarked at the time, it had not been usual for great men to be "pluralists" in these high academic distinctions.[1] Lord Curzon's thirst, however, was not so easily quenched; and when, little more than three months after his election to the Chancellorship, he was approached with a request that he would allow himself to be nominated as the Conservative candidate for the Lord Rectorship of Glasgow University, he readily consented. For the

[1] *Newcastle Journal* of January 20th, 1908.

remaining months of the year the matter was kept secret; but when in January 1908 the nominations were formally made, much piquancy was added to the situation by the fact that Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman, whose refusal to facilitate Lord Curzon's return to political life was by then well known, was found to be the Liberal candidate. As matters turned out Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman did not live to carry through the fight; and, on his death in the spring of 1908, Mr. Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, was nominated in his place. Later a third candidate entered the field in the person of Mr. Keir Hardie who came forward as a suppliant for the Socialist vote.

As the day of the election drew near, uncertainty as to the issue gave interest to the contest. The retiring Lord Rector, Mr. Asquith, had won at the previous election by a large majority; and on the eve of the poll Lord Curzon gave expression to his doubts in a letter to Alfred Lyttelton who had gone to Glasgow to address a meeting on his behalf:—"I have not heard anything about the election on Saturday. The candidates seem to be the last people informed or concerned, and for all I know the little Welsh bruiser may leave me a mangled and eviscerated corpse." When the result of the poll was declared it was seen that Lord Curzon had been elected by a small majority over Mr. Lloyd George, the figures being: Lord Curzon 947, Mr. Lloyd George, 935, Mr. Keir Hardie 122. "It was on your shoulders that I climbed," he told Alfred Lyttelton on learning the result, "a joyous as well as strenuous support in the hour of battle."

Although it had become the recognised practice for the Lord Rector to leave the bulk of his duties to be discharged by an Assessor appointed by him to the governing body, the office was not altogether a sinecure. Its occupant was regarded as the representative of the students on the Court of the University—the body which controlled its affairs and over whose deliberations, when present, it was his privilege to preside. Lord Curzon's assumption of office coincided with impending changes in the system of Scottish University training. Curricula and standards were being revised, lectures were being reduced in number and facilities for tutorial instruction added to. And it was the hope of some at least, that at this time

when efforts were being made to bring University education in Scotland into line with the requirements of modern times, Lord Curzon might do much to help and guide the movement. Apart from this, there was the ceremony of Installation to be gone through, including the delivery of a Rectorial Address.

These and all other engagements, however, were destined to undergo postponement. Lord Curzon's health, which had been giving cause for anxiety for some time past, received a fresh set back from an accident while motoring a short time before his election as Lord Rector. "I have had a real bad shock," he told Alfred Lyttelton in October, "and shall probably have to take a long sea voyage." And the new year saw him far from Oxford and Glasgow, drinking in with undisguised delight the new impressions which South Africa afforded him.

His journey from Cape Town to Kimberley had disclosed a land of illimitable spaces. The veld and the kopjes which he had pictured in imagination when he had been hurrying troops from India to save Natal ten years before, were now spread out in stark reality before his gaze. And just as at Tel el Kebir a quarter of a century earlier he had studied the battle field and commented on the conduct of the operations by Sir Garnet Wolseley, so now as he gazed from the window of his room in Kimberley upon the hills of Magersfontein, against which the gallant Highland regiments had been hurled in the calamitous opening phases of the Boer War, he marvelled at the way in which the troops of the relieving force had been despatched time after time across the level surface of the plain, "unprotected by a tree or a bush or a fold in the ground," against those sinister hills, "lined with the finest marksmen in the world."

These things however—poignant though the memories which they evoked might be—were episodes in a chapter of history now happily closed; and he turned with greater satisfaction to the novel scenes amid which he found himself. It was soon clear that he had lost nothing of his old love of travel. He devoted his attention impartially to the defences and the diamond mines of Kimberley, the latter—"a series of gigantic holes in the ground, perhaps 200 yards or more across and 500 feet deep. At the bottom are the smooth stone walls of what was once a crater, and in the blue soil

packed in the crater the diamonds are found." On a desk in the office of De Beers he saw little heaps of uncut diamonds just as they were extracted from the soil worth £150,000.[1]

The Victoria Falls with their towers of descending foam, the shouting face of the cataract, the thunder of the watery phalanxes as they charged and reeled and were shattered in the bottom of the abyss, the spray spumes whizzing upwards like a battery of rockets into the air—all these overwhelming exhibitions of elemental force held him spellbound and stirred those chords of emotion which always responded exultantly to the appeal of the grand and the beautiful in Nature. Under the influence of such stimulus from without, his artistic faculty always sought expression, and he resorted to his pen much as a painter would resort in similar circumstances to his brush. His description of the Falls of the Zambesi was published in *The Times* of April the 14th, 1909, and was subsequently reprinted in "Tales of Travel," published in 1923.

But it was not merely as a sightseer that he toured the country. South Africa with its great spaces was a fit setting for men of wide vision; and Lord Curzon soon satisfied himself that one such man, at least, had been given by South Africa to the world. Over all that vast area there seemed to brood, not less powerful in death than in life, the master spirit of Cecil Rhodes. "Every thing in this country," he exclaimed in a letter to his brother, "is Rhodes. His personality amounting to genius; his large views; his great undertakings assisted by his colossal wealth dominate everything. Everywhere are his buildings, statues and monuments, and the country is as proud of him as Corsica might be of Napoleon."[2] When visiting Cape Town he stayed in Rhodes' house—"I had his room and bed," he mentioned; and from Kimberley he travelled to Bulawayo to visit his grave in the Matoppo Hills. His was the true Imperial spirit; and behind the movement towards South African Union which he found in progress, he saw the guiding hand of Cecil Rhodes. "I venture to say," he declared at the dinner of the Imperial South African Association held in London in June of that year, "that all those who have been engaged in this great work of

[1]Letter to the Hon. F. N. Curzon, January 11th, 1909.
[2]*Ibid.*

union have felt in their hearts that they were carrying into consummation the results not merely of their own efforts, but of his as well."

There was taking place at Cape Town that which immediately arrested his attention. Here he witnessed not only a new Constitution but, as he believed, a new country struggling to birth. Within the walls of Parliament House the thirty-three foremost men of South Africa, British and Dutch, some of whom had never met and others of whom, only a few years ago, had been engaged in combat on the field of battle, were occupied with a momentous task in the domain of statecraft—no less a one than that of welding the various Colonies with their diverse interests into a splendid and powerful whole. On the main issue Lord Curzon found Briton and Boer at one. Putting from them all memories of the devastating war which had left its relics in the graves that sprinkled the veld with their frequent and pathetic mounds; thinking only of the future and its promise, all were subordinating racial, party and sectional interests to an inspiring loyalty to "the wider cause of South African Union within the sheltering embrace of the British Empire." As to the precise means by which the end was to be attained there was room for legitimate difference of opinion. Federation or Legislative Union? Which of these two ideals was best calculated to carry them to their goal? In spite of the avowed preference of the veteran statesman of Cape Colony, Mr. Hofmeyr, for Federation, Lord Curzon found the tide of opinion flowing strongly, and as he thought rightly, in the direction of a still closer Union.

But it was the complete subordination of all minor considerations to a loftier patriotism and a higher duty displayed by all concerned, that most deeply impressed Lord Curzon and that led him on his return to England to make an earnest appeal to his own countrymen through the columns of *The Times*. There was one disturbing influence in the minds of the people of South Africa; could they count on a similar subordination of party interests in Great Britain?

> "Mindful of a none too happy and a sometimes tragic past, in which the fate of South Africa has been the shuttlecock of political parties in Great Britain, and its inhabitants

have hardly known whether to fear most from the ignorance, the indifference, or the party feuds of their distant rulers, the citizens of the new South African State may be pardoned if they look with some apprehension to the future. In too many instances they have seen that what one party essays another resists; what is done by one Ministry is undone by its successor. It seems almost too good to be true that the truce which in recent years has happily overspread the field of Foreign Affairs, and which to an increasing extent is withdrawing India from the smoke of party contest, should extend its benign influence to the Colonies also, and above all to so scarred a ground of elemental warfare as South Africa. And yet may we not assure them that, if this is not already the case, at least it is the heartfelt desire of the thinking majority of our people that it should become so? May we not tell them that we regard with sympathy and with pride the dawning of a new nationality and the creation of a fresh constituent in our Imperial Confederation; that the co-operation between two races long at discord and recently in strife, but animated by similar virtues and sprung from a not dissimilar stock, is a source to us of unalloyed satisfaction; that with them we desire nothing better than that there should be an end to racial animosity, to political huckstering, and to ignoble feuds; and that their interests—the interests of the future South African Commonwealth, if it is called into being—will be equally safe with all parties in this country, because they will be enshrined in the generous confidence and, I would like to add, in the quickened conscience of the nation?"[1]

It was generally assumed—not altogether without reason—that Lord Curzon was deficient in a sense of humour where his own dignity was concerned. This was not always so. His sense of humour was sufficient on this occasion to cause him to preserve with his private papers an anonymous comment on his article, which reached him on a postcard—"I have read you in *The Times* to-day—two columns of drivelling twaddle."

[1] *The Times* of March 23rd, 1909.

The primary object of his journey, as I have explained, was change of scene and rest. If it supplied the former it can scarcely be said to have been productive of the latter; for throughout the tour the traveller's restless brain passed rapidly from one subject to another. Before he returned to England he had written single-handed his elaborate Memorandum on the Principles and Methods of University Reform which, as Sir Herbert Warren explains, formed the basis of the changes which were subsequently introduced at Oxford. And it was in the course of this same journey that he discovered, in an unused room at the back of Plantation House in St. Helena, the historic billiard table of Napoleon—a relic which had lain neglected and, indeed, unrecognised for three quarters of a century. It was, in fact, in pursuance of a project which he had formed of writing a book on the concluding years of the life of the Emperor Napoleon at St. Helena, to correct what he regarded as the popular misconceptions on the subject, that he broke his journey at the island. And it was with the same object in view that he acquired some years later that part of the A. M. Broadley Papers relating to St. Helena, which together with certain furniture of the Empire period he bequeathed to Oxford University. It is a matter for profound regret that the stress of public duties during his later years—with the exception of some months in 1924 he was continuously in office during the last ten years of his life—prevented him from carrying out his intention, except to the extent of using some small part of the material which he had collected and which he believed to be the most complete relating to the period in existence, for the purpose of chapters included in his "Tales of Travel" and "Leaves from a Viceroy's Note-Book."

Lord Curzon's absence from England during the winter had necessitated a postponement of his installation as Lord Rector of Glasgow University, since the summer term was inconvenient to the students; and in the course of a surprise visit paid to the University in October, he arranged for the ceremony to take place in January. But fate was still against him, for in November the House of Lords threw out Mr. Lloyd George's famous Budget, over whose novel and complicated taxes the House of Commons had wrangled in weary perplexity throughout a Session of abnormal bitterness and duration.

And in January Mr. Asquith appealed to the country against what he held to be their arbitrary and unconstitutional behaviour. The date of the long expected Installation was altered, consequently, to February the 25th.

The result of the General Election was not without its effect, however, on the policy of the Unionist Party. It was at last realised that the time had come when reform of the House of Lords could no longer be regarded as a question of purely academic interest; and, as one who in the past had been the most zealous and outspoken advocate of change, Lord Curzon was naturally called into consultation by the leaders of the party. Hence the Lord Rector found himself, a fortnight before the date of his installation with his Address unwritten, involved in urgent work of high political importance; and he requested a further postponement of the function.

The effect on the temper of the Scottish student community was disastrous. Strong exception was taken to what was regarded by them as a contemptuous indifference to their convenience; and at two successive mass meetings of excited undergraduates, resolutions were passed condemning the conduct of the Lord Rector. Lord Curzon was taken completely by surprise. "It is quite intolerable that they should lecture and hector a Lord Rector in that fashion," he wrote on February the 21st.[1] But he was to learn that the Scottish undergraduate was no respecter of persons, and the noise of their ebullient expostulation echoed far and wide. The witty likening of their Lord Rector, by one of them, to Rostand's chanticleer who thought that the sun could not rise without his aid—the inference drawn from Lord Curzon's letter being that he laboured under the impression that if he left London for two days the sun would cease to rise on the British Empire—provided inspiration for the cartoonists of the English press. And altogether so violent was the storm to which his action had given rise, that Lord Curzon seriously contemplated resignation.

This *dénouement* was fortunately avoided by a plebiscite taken among the students as a whole, the result of which was to exonerate him by a large majority of any intentional discourtesy. And at

[1]Letter to Lord Lamington.

long last in January 1911, within nine months of the termination of his three years term of office, the Installation ceremony was performed and the Rectorial Address delivered.

The Address was a memorable one in the annals of the University. Taking the relations of Europe and Asia as his theme he spoke of the political aspirations which had been generated in Eastern countries by recent contact with the democratic nations of the West. But it was his purpose to place such matters in true historical perspective rather than to discuss them on their merits—to depict them as the most recent phase of an age-long story of action and reaction between East and West. He had discussed the place of India in the Empire and the questions which arose naturally out of consideration of that subject, in an Address before the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, fifteen months before; and on this occasion he was at greater pains to paint a picture than to develop and sustain an argument. He lingered fondly over his descriptions of the East as "the home of recondite philosophies and all powerful creeds, of abstruse metaphysics and the mystic cult of the unseen, commingled in bewildering juxtaposition with strange idolatries and savage superstitions"; and again as the abode of "an eternal mystery and an irresistible romance, casting its glamour equally over poets and men of action but confounding all with its inscrutable secrets, and testifying in mournful accents to the limitations of human intellect or the vanity of human ambitions." To him, he declared, Asia was like "some beautiful spirit whose heavy eyelids seem to be always half closed, and who nods, with a half smile on her face, in a land of everlasting dreams."

It must, indeed, have been plain to those who listened to him that, as he spoke to them, he was living over again those enthralling years of travel which had brought him into such intimate contact with the splendour and havoc of the East. He dwelt on her landscapes of "extreme contrast but of wonderful beauty and dominating grandeur, her panorama of vast plains and mighty mountains of utter desolation and soaking verdure; of cities crowded beyond belief and coloured as the rainbow and almost within a stone's-throw placid villages which have known no change since Abraham—the shepherd with his slowly-moving flock and the creaking of

the water-wheels at the wells." He called to mind her amazing wealth, her silks and muslins, her pearls and ivories, her gold and silver and gems; but he spoke also of a squalor that appalled and a filth that festered. The picture that he painted was of a world of bewildering contrasts "splendid and pathetic, sunlit and sombre, rich beyond dreams and poverty-stricken beyond conception, marvellous and commonplace, cultured and barbarous, the greatest of all contrasts and the most paradoxical of all contradictions."

Lord Curzon had intended elaborating the theme and bringing it out in book form, and the type was actually kept standing for many months. But matters of political importance now began crowding in upon him and the type was eventually distributed without the task having been completed.

It was Mr. Lloyd George's Budget of 1909 that had brought Lord Curzon back definitely into the arena of party politics. Up to that time his position *vis-à-vis* the leaders of the Conservative party had been that of an ally rather than of a colleague; and there had been occasions on which he had not hesitated to criticise their action with the freedom which is not infrequently regarded as the most valued privilege of an ally. "In my view," he had told Ian Malcolm in August 1908, "the House of Lords acted unwisely in touching the Old Age Pensions Bill. They ought to have left it severely alone. As it is they invited and received a smart rebuff. I think it was bad generalship." Earlier in the Session he had expressed opinions in his private correspondence which were certainly at variance with the attitude officially adopted by the party—"If the Lords throw out the Temperance Bill (which I hope they wont do as it is not half a bad one; whisper this not in Askalon) they" —the Government—"will dissolve pretty soon knowing that we are not ready . . ."[1]

His dislike of the Tariff Reform programme had hitherto stood in the way of a more complete reconciliation; and it was the vista of social legislation based on huge and ever expanding subsidies from the State which had been opened up by the Budget of 1909, that tipped the scale in favour of Protection in his mind and removed the last obstacle to his return to the party fold. Remunera-

[1]Letter to Lord Selborne, May 8th, 1908.

tive employment, he now argued, and not subsidised idleness, must be the basis of national prosperity; and, while our mills and yards lay idle, he saw millions of pounds worth of manufactured goods pouring untaxed into our ports from abroad. "Are we the only wise people in the world," he asked at Leeds, "who go on worshipping Free Trade long after it has become a dilapidated image in an empty shrine?" There was no longer any doubt where he stood; and the next time he appeared on a platform—at Oldham in December 1909—it was not merely at his own desire, as the Chairman of the meeting pointedly observed, but at the urgent request of the local Conservative organisation.

The party truce brought about by the lamented death of King Edward on May the 6th, 1910, failed to effect a solution of the Constitutional crisis in which the country was involved; and if the General Election which followed in December added nothing to the strength of Mr. Asquith's following in the House of Commons, it certainly did not lessen the difficulties of the Unionist party. The hasty adoption by the latter of the Referendum and of Reform of the House of Lords as planks in its platform, had savoured too much of death bed repentance to carry conviction with the average man; and it was now clear that the Prime Minister was expected by his followers to lose no time in settling the question of the veto. The question, therefore, which was now anxiously debated in Unionist circles was how far Mr. Asquith would be prepared to go in his attempt to compel acceptance of the Parliament Bill. Would he advise a wholesale creation of peers; or were the hints that he would do so to be attributed to a hope that he could bluff his opponents into that belief?

Prior to the Election Lord Curzon had been inclined to ridicule the idea of a huge creation of peers for the purpose of forcing the Parliament Bill through the Upper Chamber. "The idea that the House of Lords can be intimidated, or coerced, or cajoled, by the threat of the creation of five hundred peers to act in a manner inconsistent with its own conviction or conscience, appears to me a fantastic dream."[1] To select five hundred gentlemen to march like well drilled supers into the House of Lords in order

[1] Speech at Reading, May 5th, 1910.

to vote to reduce the Chamber of which they had been members for five or ten minutes to a nullity and a sham was, he declared, not politics but pantomime which would excite the inextinguishable laughter of the civilised world. Even after the Election he had spoken derisively at a private luncheon of Unionist candidates and M.Ps. of any such proceeding, and had advised his audience—somewhat incautiously as it turned out—to fight in the last ditch and let them make their peers if they dared.

As soon, however, as he realised that the Prime Minister was determined to carry out his threat; that he had received an intimation from the King that he would consider it his duty to act upon the advice tendered to him by his responsible Ministers, and that a creation of peers would be employed, not merely for the purpose of securing the passage of the Parliament Bill, but for enacting Home Rule for Ireland and other radical measures, he reconsidered his position and thenceforward never wavered in his view that in these altered circumstances it would be fatal to the best interests of the country—and not least to the position of the Crown—to force the hand of the Government by standing out longer against the Parliament Bill. He argued his case in a letter which appeared in *The Times* of July the 24th and thereafter a committee met daily at his house for the purpose of organising support for the course recommended by Lord Lansdowne of abstaining from voting on the final stage of the Bill. Lord Lansdowne was unwilling to countenance more than this; Lord Curzon's inclination would have been if not actually to urge, at least to view with approval, a decision on the part of such Unionist peers as shared his views, to join the Government in the lobby rather than acquiesce in the policy of the Diehards under the leadership of Lord Halsbury of forcing the employment of the Royal prerogative. But he trusted that this necessity might not arise.

> "I hope you will not vote with the minority," he begged Lord Roberts, "but that with Lord Lansdowne you will abstain. The protest which you and others desired to make has been made; public attention has been drawn to the outrage of the Bill and the scandalous abuse of the Royal Prero-

> gative. Any vote that you give now can either produce no effect or drive into the Government lobby some self sacrificing and conscientious Unionist Peer who will go so far as to vote for the Government sooner than see the peers created. That would be a lamentable result and we desire that no one should be placed in so invidious a position."[1]

Nevertheless throughout the exhausting days which led up to the final scene in the House of Lords, he was in constant touch with those peers who were untrammelled by party ties and were willing to take this course.

On August the 8th in a brilliant speech he moved the official Unionist Resolution, denouncing the advice tendered by the Prime Minister to the Sovereign as "a gross violation of constitutional liberty." And having thus made clear the position of those who were acting with him, he made, two days later, the speech which was intended to bring the fateful debate on the Parliament Bill to a close. Uncertainty as to the result produced an atmosphere of excitement seldom experienced in the decorous proceedings of the Upper Chamber; and when Lord Curzon sat down Lord Halsbury, Lord Rosebery and Lord Selborne rose in quick succession to address the House. Those who chanced to be present, as I was, on the steps of the throne, will not easily forget those last few feverish minutes of a memorable debate. It was impossible to withhold a measure of sympathy and admiration from Lord Halsbury, courageous, stubborn, fighting to the end—a fine epitome of the characteristics of his race—as he solemnly commended his action to the judgment of God and his conscience. Lord Curzon sat pale and angry as amid growing clamour Lord Selborne sprang to the table, and in strident tones and with dramatic gestures made a fierce appeal to the House to defeat the Bill. Few debates in either House in modern times can have exercised so determining an influence upon the actions of so many people. A speech by Lord Camperdown, in which he stated his intention of voting with the Government, determined the Duke of Norfolk and others associated with him who had intended to abstain, to go into the lobby with Lord Halsbury

[1] Letter dated July 30th, 1911.

and his friends; this decision was in its turn responsible for others, who had meant to abstain from voting, joining the Government in support of the Bill. No one knew, when the division was called, what the result would be; though it was realised that the balance would swing one way or the other, according to the number of Unionist peers who ended by answering in the affirmative the question whether circumstances demanded of them that they should sacrifice themselves by voting for a measure of which they profoundly disapproved. More than a score did so, and to a crowded and palpitating House the tellers announced the victory of the Government by a majority of seventeen.

The depth of feeling which had been stirred, more particularly by the action of those members of the Conservative party who had voted with the Government, was apparent the same night when, at an excited gathering at the Carlton Club, they were greeted with cries of "Shame" and shouts of "Judas." Lord Curzon, in view of the published advice to the party given by Lord Lansdowne, had decided that as a member of the Conservative Shadow Cabinet he could not himself go beyond the official policy of his party; but he was held responsible—not without reason—for the result of the division, and he felt acutely the hostility which the part which he had played in it excited. And from the worry and vexation and the thanklessness of party politics he turned with relief to other matters. "All these talks and arguings and conferences have nearly finished me off," he had written on July the 20th, when the controversy as to the attitude to be adopted towards the Parliament Bill was at its height. "Public life is all against the collar for me since I am almost always in uneasiness and pain."[1] With his own party hopelessly divided and with life long friends at variance with him, the old zest for battle was for the time being dead and disillusionment was bitter. "Some of us who are not physically too strong, see our best years sliding away," he wrote. And depression overcame him—"I wish I had strength for more than I do. But I am frequently in pain and seldom very far away from a breakdown. My autumn must be one not of platforms but of rest."[2]

[1]Letter to a friend.
[2]Letter to a friend dated August 18th, 1911.