CHAPTER IV

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

1911-1914

WHEN Lord Curzon declared that his autumn must be a period of rest, he only meant that he intended to desist from taking any serious part in the particular form of activity which for the time being had become distasteful to him, namely, party politics. Rest in the sense of abstention from definite occupation was no more possible to him now than it had ever been. For him relaxation meant merely the substitution of one form of activity for another—of a pleasurable occupation for one that had become irksome. And no sooner was the Constitutional crisis over than he threw himself with zest into a triangular correspondence with Professor A. A. MacDonell and the Maharaja of Nepal, with the object of securing for the Bodleian Library at Oxford the loan of a number of ancient and valuable Sanskrit manuscripts which were known to repose in the Royal Library at Kathmandu. His efforts were successful, and as a result the originals of seventy rare manuscripts, hitherto buried in the dusty archives of a mountain citadel inaccessible to the scholarship of Europe, were made available to the Sanskrit scholars of the world.

Incidentally in the course of the correspondence, Lord Curzon returned to a subject which he had first taken up when in India as Viceroy, namely, that of the exploration of Mount Everest. He broached the subject with the tact which, in view of his own failure while in India to secure an invitation to pass beyond the fringes of Nepal, he well knew that it demanded. Having informed the

Maharaja that the Royal Geographical Society had decided to pay him the unusual compliment of making him an Honorary Life Fellow, he went on to express a hope that he might some day win the great renown of sanctioning a pioneer party to explore the mountain. His exalted correspondent with equal delicacy declared himself flattered by being thought of in such a connection, but lamented the conservatism of his people which, he feared, was likely to deprive him of the distinction.[1] By way of comment on this correspondence it is only necessary to add that when in 1922 an expedition at length set out to make an attempt to reach the summit of Mount Everest, it was *via* Tibet and not Nepal that it approached the mountain.

On his return from India, Lord Curzon had rejoined the Council of the Royal Geographical Society, and shortly before launching his *ballon d'essai* on the subject of Mount Everest, had become President thereof. Among its Fellows his acceptance of office gave rise to interesting speculation. Nor were they kept long in doubt as to the particular manner in which he proposed to leave his mark upon its fortunes; for when presiding at the annual dinner of the Society on May the 26th, 1911, four days only after his election to the Presidentship, he proceeded to take them into his confidence. The time had surely come, he said, when the Society should acquire a habitation more worthy of its pre-eminent position and better suited to the rapidly expanding scope of its activities. It was intolerable that the volumes of what should be the finest geographical library in the world should be scattered inconveniently in obscure and dismal chambers; its maps crowded in tantalising profusion in a totally inadequate setting and the activities of its members generally hampered by lack of space. And he foreshadowed the early submission to them of a concrete scheme for dealing with these shortcomings.

The idea was not a new one. For twenty years successive Presidents had urged the importance of something being done. In 1909 under the Presidentship of Major Leonard Darwin, matters had reached a stage at which the Society had passed a resolution endorsing the view that a change of habitation was desirable and authoris-

[1] Letter from the Maharaja of Nepal, October 23rd, 1911.

ing the formation of a building fund. But it required Lord Curzon's enthusiasm and driving power to give what had hitherto been little more than a pious aspiration, the chance of emerging into the sphere of what was practicable. When once he had decided to take the matter up, he threw himself with characteristic thoroughness into the work. Not even the anxieties of the Parliamentary crisis were permitted to interrupt him in the prosecution of his self-imposed and laborious task. "I have been away here with the children," he wrote from Broadstairs, at a time when the political world was convulsed with the controversy over the House of Lords, "collecting money for the Geographical Society and writing a book."[1] And within a few weeks of his assumption of the office of President he was remarking casually in a letter to a friend that he had already collected a sum of £12,000.[2] At his bidding money flowed in with astonishing rapidity, and less than a week later he was writing to Ian Malcolm—"You are a Fellow and have not subscribed. Will you? I have raised nearly £25,000."

To what were such remarkable results due? It is impossible to attribute them to anything else than Lord Curzon's own forceful personality. Immeasurable enthusiasm, unshakable determination, an embarrassing lack of diffidence in making clear to all whom he approached precisely what he expected of them, and not least his invariable practice of leaving nothing either to chance or to others, made of him a splendid and extraordinarily successful beggar. "When one takes things up," he wrote in connection with one of his many appeals for funds, "it is usually found that one has to do the whole thing, while other people look on in mute and maddening acquiescence." The reward which crowned his appeal for money for the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta was, perhaps, the most spectacular of his successes. But the qualities which enabled him to bring that tremendous undertaking—involving as I have explained in an earlier chapter an outlay of more than £500,000—to a successful issue, served him to equally good purpose in the many appeals for which he subsequently made himself responsible.

Many examples of successful mendicancy might be given. A typical illustration is provided by the appeal which he issued not

[1] Letter to Mrs. Asquith, afterwards Lady Oxford.
[2] Letter to Lord Lamington, October 13th, 1911.

long after his return from India, with a view to making good an omission to do honour to a great Englishman which he regarded as being in the highest degree discreditable to the English name. Shocked at his discovery that neither in England nor in India was there any public monument to Lord Clive, the first founder of British Empire in Asia, he had, while still in India, caused to be marked out on the site itself, the position of the forces that had been ranged up on the battlefield of Plassey; and had further commemorated Lord Clive's achievement by an obelisk erected on the spot. But he aimed at something more than a local memorial to a man who loomed so large in the pages of British history, and in the spring of 1907, he sat down to pen an appeal for funds to enable him to have statues of him erected both in London and in Calcutta. He was unaware at the time, of the efforts which had been made by men of Clive's own county, Shropshire, and notably by Colonel H. Southam, then Mayor of Shrewsbury, Sir Offley Wakeman, Chairman of Quarter Sessions and Sir J. Bowen Jones, Chairman of the Salop County Council, from 1902 onwards to have the omission repaired. And when, after issuing his appeal, he heard of the efforts which had already been made, he wrote with characteristic generosity acknowledging their priority in the field and soliciting their support. But it was the case of the Building Fund of the Royal Geographical Society over again; it required Lord Curzon's prestige and driving force to carry the project to a successful issue.

The glowing words in which he set forth Lord Clive's claims to recognition bore convincing testimony to the depth of his feelings in the matter. Though Clive's life "was passed amid startling vicissitudes of fortune and went out in tempestuous gloom, it was a life of pre-eminent service, of dazzling achievement and of eternal renown. Persecuted and reviled beyond almost any other public servant (except his even greater successor) in a century of the coarsest political passions and the blackest political ingratitude no national celebration followed his melancholy demise. Not in the great temple of reconciliation, but in a humble parish church, unmarked by slab or monument, were laid the remains of the man who at the age of thirty-one planted the foundations of an Empire more enduring than Alexander's, more splendid than Cæsar's . . ."

And if these moving words bear witness to the emotional fires that burned beneath the cold exterior of the man, a few sentences in his handwriting, scribbled across the cover of a copy of the pamphlet in which they were set forth, bear equally striking testimony to the incongruous extremes to which his exuberant nature was constantly betraying him. "Mightn't you do a bit of touting on our behalf?" he wrote, when forwarding the copy to a friend. "No one ever forks out now-a-days without personal solicitation—I might almost say without a pistol." People who were familiar with the rich and picturesque phraseology of his public utterances were often puzzled and not a little shocked at such descents from rhetoric to slang—lapses which when perpetrated by others could be counted on to call forth Lord Curzon's own horrified denunciation; "What is America coming to," he once asked in scandalised astonishment, "when the Chairman of the great dinner to Sir Thomas Lipton at New York addressed the guest of the evening in the following language—'Sir Thomas, you are a corker!'—this evidently being the highest form of compliment?"[1] Those who in the course of conversation with Lord Curzon were suddenly greeted with some excruciating colloquialism or with an explosion of Rabelaisian humour, were apt to ask themselves a similar question. "But surely that's an awful corker!" he exclaimed to an astonished official in India who was explaining to him the grievances of an Indian potentate. "I like to hear a fellow spit it out!" he remarked on another occasion when, at a drawing-room party arranged for his entertainment, he had listened to a somewhat vigorous tenor doing his best with Schumann's "Two Grenadiers."

This, however, is by the way. The moving language of his appeal to his fellow countrymen to wipe out the stain of a century and a half of neglect, was not without effect, and there now stands at the head of the steps by the India Office, overlooking St. James's Park, a noble statue of Clive in bronze, and in the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta a replica of the same statue in white marble; while his name and fame are commemorated in Westminster Abbey by a portrait medallion admirably executed by Mr. John Tweed on the lines of a fine but little known picture by Gainsborough. And so

[1] Letter to Lady Curzon, October 3rd, 1903.

at last, as Lord Curzon himself wrote some years afterwards, Robert Clive took his place, "among the silent great ones who yet speak, and will speak for all time from the walls of the metropolitan temple of our race."[1]

The response to Lord Curzon's appeal on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society had been so remarkable that he now felt justified in summoning a special General Meeting of the Society for the purpose of obtaining sanction for the sale of the existing premises. At this meeting held on January the 15th, 1912, he explained that when he had assumed office the Darwin Building Fund aided by legacies amounting to £3,000 had stood at £6,420; but that the new fund, which he had himself inaugurated only eight months before, already amounted to over £31,000, so that the Society had at its disposal a sum of £37,000. And in addition the Government who were as a rule, "more given to taking money from others than to giving it themselves," had been persuaded, provided more commodious premises were acquired, to raise their grant from £500 to £1,250 a year. Authority to sell the premises in Savile Row was given with only one dissentient.

Lord Curzon proceeded with a rapidity which must have disarmed the cynical and confounded the sceptics. By the end of July he had sold the building for a sum appreciably above the reserve placed upon it, and had purchased Lowther Lodge within a stone's throw of the Albert Hall, a building admirably suited to the purposes of the Society, and having in addition two acres of unbuilt on ground "of which," he explained in a circular letter to the Fellows, "it should not be difficult to sell so much as may be required to build for the Society a hall to contain over 1,000 persons in immediate proximity to the house on the east side. We should thus be in a position to secure our own hall for nothing and to solve the problem which has baffled us for half a century and has driven us to accept the hospitality of Burlington House in a theatre the discomforts of which have been a source of constant complaint."[2]

[1] "British Government in India," vol II, p. 145.

[2] Letter dated July 29th, 1912. Owing to circumstances over which Lord Curzon had no control an agreement for the sale of the surplus land, which was reached largely as a result of his own activity but which was never ratified, fell through; and it was not until 1927 that a sale was at last effected.

On April the 14th, 1913, less than two years after his assumption of the Presidentship, Lord Curzon had the satisfaction of seeing the Society installed in its new home.

It was, perhaps, the increased liabilities entailed by this change of habitation, combined with the enhanced accommodation which it provided, that led Lord Curzon to change his mind—a rare event—on a question of no small importance, namely, that of the admission of women to the Fellowship of the Society. "Their contributions to the sources of the Society," he pointed out in the course of his Presidential Address, on May the 26th, 1913, "will add to our power of usefulness in the future."

In sponsoring a change which twenty years before he had opposed and defeated he left nothing to chance. In 1892 his vigorously prosecuted opposition to the proposal had been successful largely owing to the hostility of the Fellows, not to the admission of women *per se*, but to the action of the Council of that day in electing a small number of ladies without prior reference to the Society as a whole. Lord Curzon was careful to run no such risk. On November the 21st, 1912, he issued to all Fellows a circular letter in which the case for reform was stated and carefully argued. Having by referendum obtained a majority of more than three to one in favour of the proposal, he then submitted it to the vote at a special General Meeting held on January the 15th, 1913. He admitted that he had changed his views since he had last been prominently associated with the question; but he emphatically denied any inconsistency on the part of those who supported the admission of women to membership of a scientific body, while continuing to offer unyielding opposition to their political enfranchisement.

> "For in the one case it is the grant of a political right that is in question, a share in the Sovereignty of the country and the Empire. In the other case it is the concession to women of equal intellectual and educational opportunity with men, and a voice, in all probability a very limited voice, in the control of a Society that exists for nothing more formidable or contentious than the advancement of a particular department of human knowledge."

A minority of their Fellows—the actual scientists and explorers among them—he went on to point out, contributed directly to the advancement of geographical knowledge; the majority contributed indirectly to the same cause by providing, in the form of their annual subscriptions, the funds which were necessary to the prosecution of their science. Why, then, should they say that such contributions, essential as they were, should be rejected simply because they happened to be offered by persons of the female sex?

The motion did not escape opposition; but with the ground prepared as carefully as it had been, the result was never in doubt, and of those present at the meeting, 130 voted for it and 51 against.

That Lord Curzon's term of office should have coincided with a great outburst of activity in exploration, resulting among other things in the discovery of the South Pole "and the mingled tragedy and glory of the expedition of Scott and Mawson," was accidental. But Lord Curzon did undoubtedly do much to bring the existence and the work of the Society to the notice of a wider public. He sought with marked success to persuade the most eminent men of the day that patronage of geography was an obligation equally incumbent on the administrator, the philosopher and the statesman; and among the guests who accepted the hospitality of the Society at its annual dinners during his term of office were Cabinet Ministers from the Prime Minister downwards. The increasing share of public interest which was thus attracted to the Society was reflected in the rapid increase in its membership. During his Presidentship the number of Fellows jumped from 4,867 to 5,300, and the Society's income from £14,300 to £16,500.

But most characteristic of all, perhaps, was the personal care which he devoted to the arrangement of the building which he had chosen and purchased for the Society, from the selection of its wall papers, carpets, furniture and ornaments, and the hanging of its pictures, to the choice and acquisition, whether by purchase or by appeal, of additions to its picture gallery and museum. "A persevering correspondence with the families or descendants of famous men has resulted," he said in the course of his last Presidential Address, "in the gift of many relics and objects of high personal value." He added the hope that the practice of collecting such things would be

persevered with and that the Society would be able to show in unbroken sequence memorials of all those who had won renown in the field of geography. The portrait of Lord Curzon himself by Sargent, which now hangs over the mantelpiece in the Council Room, stands alike as a memorial of his services to the cause of geography and as a token of appreciation on the part of those whose affairs he directed with such success, unique in the annals of the Society.

His interest in the affairs of the institution did not cease with his relinquishment of office. He had obtained from the late Lord Glenconner a gift of £500 for the adornment of the Society's new home, and constant attendance at Christie's enabled him to make valuable additions to its collection of furniture and pictures.

The collection of works of art both for himself and for public institutions was a hobby from which he derived immense delight. When in London he was a regular visitor at Christie's, so much so that in the spring of 1910 he was called as a witness for the defence in a law suit brought against Messrs. Christie in connection with their preparation of a catalogue dealing with a sale of china. And of all the institutions in which he was interested, none benefited more from his pursuit of this hobby than the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta. From the time when he first propounded his scheme to the Indian public to the day of his death, he never wearied of his quest after objects of historic or artistic interest for the collection which he had always intended that the building should house. I was not in the least surprised when I was told by Mr. Clement Jones, who served as secretary of the Shipping Control Committee which was set up in 1916 to cope with the grave position which had arisen owing to shortage of tonnage, that as Chairman of the Committee Lord Curzon appeared to take as much personal interest in arranging for the conveyance of some marble from Italy for some purpose connected with the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta, as he did in dealing with a communication of the highest importance from the Foreign Office, touching on the whole question of the shipping requirements of the Allies. Many of the exhibits which it now possesses came to it by gift or by bequest at Lord Curzon's personal solicitation; others were purchased by him

from time to time on behalf of the Trustees. No opportunity of adding to the collection was ever lost. "By the way," he wrote, when inviting Sir Rennell Rodd to visit him in India, "would not some memento of your grandfather, the famous Rennell, be very appropriate for our Indian Valhalla, the Victoria Memorial Hall? Have you or your family anything that you would like to give?"[1] If he had drawn his bow at a venture he had not done so in vain, as witness a letter to the same correspondent four months later—"Yes, I will hold you to the bronze bust of old Rennell. We shall be most grateful for it. The other day I was wandering about in Bengal with a map of his in my hand."[2] How many other articles—miniatures, manuscripts, pictures, prints—now reposing beneath the marble domes of the shimmering white building at the southern end of the Calcutta Maidan, were not obtained as a result of similar displays of personal solicitude? The Report of the Trustees of the Victoria Memorial Hall for the year 1925 lies before me as I write. Therein it is stated that without Lord Curzon's "incessant interest and personal labour after he ceased to be Viceroy, the collection would never have been brought together." He retained his interest in it to the end, and on his death bequeathed to it a three-quarter length portrait of Major-General Stringer Lawrence, by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Lord Curzon's qualifications for Trusteeship of the Art Treasures of the nation were too obvious to be overlooked; and, on the death of Lord Carlisle in the spring of 1911, he was appointed a Trustee of the National Gallery in his place. Few Trustees can have taken a more conscientious view of their duties than he did. Before he had been many months on the Board, his colleagues were given a taste of his reforming zeal. In November he moved for, and secured the appointment of, a Committee to enquire into the retention of important pictures in this country and other matters connected with the National Art Collections. The Committee under his chairmanship held a number of meetings to consider the general principles underlying the subject and the procedure to be adopted in its investigation; and it was not until the autumn of 1912 that they

[1] Letter dated November 22nd, 1901.
[2] Letter dated March 20th, 1902.

were prepared to begin the examination of the witnesses whom they decided to invite to give evidence before them. Throughout the autumn and winter the process of examining witnesses proceeded, and towards the end of 1913, the Committee, after digesting the great mass of material which had been collected for their use, presented their Report to the Board of Trustees. Lord Curzon left nothing to chance. He wrote the Report covering 149 foolscap sheets of paper with his own hand, and he was successful in carrying the Trustees with him at a series of meetings held specially for the purpose of considering the recommendations made. And having secured the concurrence of the Board, he proceeded characteristically to write the long covering letter which reached the Treasury over the signature of the secretary, commending to the favourable consideration of the Government the recommendations of the Report which required their co-operation or assent. His labours were not even then completed. Between the submission of the Report to the Treasury in March 1914, and its presentation to Parliament a year later, he was involved in an exacting correspondence over a difference of opinion which had arisen between the members of the Committee on a question of the highest importance, but one which Lord Curzon held to be outside the terms of reference, namely, that of the relations of the Director of the National Gallery to the Trustees. And there is little doubt that but for the time and energy which he devoted to pressing his view, the brief note attached to Mr. Benson's signature to the Report, indicating that it was appended subject to dissent on this point, would have been replaced by a Minute arguing the case for a fundamental change in the powers of the Director and in the practice under which purchases were made by the Board of Trustees as a whole.

The story of the appointment of the Committee and of its subsequent labours is of interest, as showing the enthusiasm with which Lord Curzon took up any work of the kind which was entrusted to him. The value of such service rendered ungrudgingly to the Nation was fully appreciated by the Government; and when, thirteen years later, in 1924, the Government of that day decided to appoint a Fine Arts Commission to whom they and other authorities of standing might turn for advice on such matters as the

location of statues and monuments in public places, whether in London or the provinces, the selection of models for such works, questions of town planning and of landscape gardening in public parks, the Prime Minister turned instinctively to him as being peculiarly well qualified to direct the activities of the new body. Though for various reasons Lord Curzon was unwilling to accept the chairmanship, he served as a member of the Commission under Lord Crawford till his death.