

MARY CURZON

NIGEL NICOLSON

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not begging him to go, recognized that his devotion to his work (it could no longer be called ambition, for it was dedication) was an impulse so strong in him that to thwart it would be a crueller blow to him than his departure was to her. A protest might wreck her marriage, the foundation of her existence. She had noticed in recent years how her mother had drawn apart from her father. She believed her sisters' marriages to be thin, shallow-rooted, social affairs. Hers was quite different. It had started in undeclared loneliness, been preserved and deepened by tribulations (her failure to bear a son was not the least of them), and almost ended in premature death. All this time her love for Curzon had grown through her life like a plant, and so had his for her. To preserve it was worth every sacrifice, every effort. Curzon's struggle to rule India, and her struggle to rule herself, were complementary duties, mutually sustaining.

So she determined to rejoin him in India. There was a certain glory in it, a defiance of fate, a gesture which would cap the miracle of her recovery, and Mary was not indifferent to the effect it would create. If she had not wholly fulfilled herself in India, which she felt at times, her return as if from the dead would exhilarate an entire continent and justify her role. It would be her most magnificent contribution to Curzon's career, at a moment when he was under severest pressure, and when he needed her most. She would not need to stay there more than eighteen months. She would be excused much that was previously assumed. Her return was what mattered, and her continuing presence. If she were to die, it would be better to die in India than in some rented English house, with Curzon beside her, instead of alone in terror.

She embarked at Tilbury on 9 February 1905, on the same ship, *SS Arabia*, which had taken her to India six years before. Her three little girls were with her, with two nurses, one for Mary and one for the baby, and a live cow in the hold to supply Alexandra with fresh milk. Nancy (now Campbell) saw her off from Highcliffe, and Daisy (now Lady Suffolk) from Tilbury, and touching messages awaited her on board from the King and Prime Minister. At Bombay Curzon was on the pier to greet her.

There, and a few days later in Calcutta, she was acclaimed by the crowds with a delight that no woman in India had experienced before. The streets were lined with the British and American flags, ships in the harbours decorated overall, and bouquets were tossed into her carriage as she passed. At Government House a thousand people, including Kitchener, lined the lawns and steps. She entered the Throne Room in a new white dress, 'looking beautifully well', said an eyewitness, 'bright and cheerful as one could wish to see, with no trace whatever of her recent illness'. When Perceval Landon, correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, said to her that she seemed as one risen from the dead, 'she turned towards me with that direct and level glance which was one of her most attractive characteristics, and answered, "Yes – but one may not do those things twice."'”

SIMLA AND KEDLESTON

WHEN Dalhousie, after seven years in Calcutta, prepared to hand over the Viceroyalty to Lord Elgin in 1856, he wrote to a friend: 'If Elgin cannot properly bring his wife to India, he will be a fool if he comes without her, and a maniac if he runs the risk of bringing her after all.' Dalhousie's own wife had died at sea three years earlier, when he sent her home to recover her health. Curzon quoted the letter in his *British Government in India*, at the end of a melancholy catalogue of the sufferings of his predecessors. 'Over the Viceregal throne there hangs not only a canopy of broidered gold,' he wrote, 'but a mist of human tears.' Then he allowed himself to add this reminder of his own anguish, though anonymously: 'A later Viceroy lost the partner and main author of his happiness in India a few months after they left the shores of that country, to whose climate the recurrence of the illness which terminated her life was largely due.'

He believed that India killed Mary, and she too had long felt a premonition that she would end her days there: 'The bell will go, and India will kill me as one of the humble and inconsequent lives who go into the foundations of all great works, great buildings and great achievements.' Both on Curzon's part and on Mary's it was a pardonable dramatization, which no doctor ever confirmed. Mary did not die in India, and she did not suffer in India any illness which so weakened her that she perished like a withered plant on her return home. Her accounts of her many official tours already quoted in this book show that she stood the

heat and monsoon without great strain, and was in fact most animated when constantly travelling and most on show. She sturdily followed Curzon even on his hunting expeditions. 'We had such a delicious day,' she wrote after one such foray into the mountains near Simla. 'I trudged about with George from one beat to another . . . The little Maharajah who hovered near us kept begging me to get into his dhoolie. He could not understand a woman who walked all day behind guns.' That does not conjure up the picture of an invalid. Mary's illnesses in India usually coincided with the periods when she had nothing much to do, at Simla particularly, and she was apt to blame on the climate the lassitude induced by loneliness and depression, and on the altitude the exhaustion caused by minor social duties. She had recurrent migraine and occasional attacks of dizziness, but she escaped all tropical diseases, and her life in India was never once in danger through sickness. After her near-mortal illness in 1904, India was actually recuperative. The doctors, and her own inclination, were proved right. The long sea-voyage had greatly helped her convalescence, and during the few weeks she spent in Calcutta, people were amazed to see how energetically she took her part in entertainments which they had assumed would be beyond her. Even Simla, where she went in March, now seemed a rest-cure:

I think the summer here without care will be my salvation, [she wrote to her mother]. I could never have got well in England, badgered and worried by a great house. Here at least I have peace of mind and everything done for me. In all my years in India I have never suffered such atrocious ills as I did during my year at home. My heart is very tender towards India, and I shall do my best to get well here. I am practically all right, and only want a little more strength to make me fit, and you know that I have all your strength of will.

She was excused all but a few functions, and spent long hours reading in a corner of Curzon's study while he worked. The children were a great joy to both of them, and smoothed away his tension and irritability. 'In his daily life,' wrote Lord Ronaldshay, 'for all his seeming strength and self-sufficiency, he

was extraordinarily dependent upon others for his happiness.' Stealing a moment from his work, he would write for the little girls notes of touching whimsy and affection, folding them in the complicated manner, latticewise, he had learnt at Eton, and sent them round to their rooms by a servant. One or two happen to have survived, and here is an example from a slightly later date: 'My darling little Baba, I am so pleased to see your precious dimple again. Is there a rabbit inside it?'

The happiness of their family life, and the dry Simla air, restored Mary to complete health. Curzon reported to Mrs Leiter later in the year, 'I truly believe that she is far better now than she would have been had she spent the last 6 months in England. Barring the headaches, she is splendidly well.' By the early summer, in fact, she was in a better condition than Curzon himself. He was forced to spend a whole month in bed when his leg became too painful for him to walk even to his study.

However, death did nearly come to Mary in India, from an earthquake. On 3 April 1905, when Curzon was at Agra supervizing the restoration of the Taj Mahal, Mary was at Viceregal Lodge with the children. At 6 o'clock that morning, when she was still half-asleep, she felt her bedroom swaying like a cabin on a heaving ship. Immediately afterwards she heard a heavy fall of masonry, and ran into the great hall fearing that the tower had collapsed on the children's wing. As she paused there, the skylight fell in pieces around her. She took refuge in the smallest of the sitting-rooms, crouching in a corner, for it seemed that the whole house was about to collapse. An ADC came to tell her that the children were safe, but they must all leave the house at once. She flung some clothes over her night-dress, gathered the children, and while the building was still rocking, ran with them back through the hall and into the garden. The tremors continued for about an hour, and when they appeared to subside, Mary took the girls into a relatively undamaged part of the house, as it was too cold to remain outside. They spent the rest of the day and the next night huddled on the ground floor. There were fifteen smaller shocks which

further weakened the structure to a point which made it a death-trap, and they moved into a smaller house nearby, where they were so cold that they ate in hats and fur-coats and slept fully dressed. The children, Mary told her mother, were as good as mice, 'and little Sandra smiled sweetly in the general pandemonium'.

Next day she went to inspect the damage. The main tower stood intact, but the house was uninhabitable, and its rebuilding was to take 300 men three months work. A twenty-ton stone chimney had collapsed and broken through the roof and ceiling of the room immediately above her own, and but for the chance that the rubble and masonry fell on a thickly mattressed double-bed in that room, she would have been killed instantly, as her own bed lay directly beneath it. As it was, the walls of her bedroom bulged menacingly, and only a very strong girder had prevented them from falling inwards on top of her. Her escape was greeted as further evidence of a charmed life. One thousand five hundred people died in the earthquake at Simla and in its neighbouring province. Curzon returned as soon as he could, and moved his family to Naldera, where only the mosquitoes disturbed their peace.

The last few months of Curzon's Viceroyalty, which should have put a seal of honour on his achievement, were scarred by quarrels, treachery and the destruction of some of his closest friendships. He resigned his office, and returned home a humiliated and embittered man. Throughout this shattering experience, from which his spirits and career took some ten years to recover, his mainstay was Mary. Never had he been in greater need of her support and consolation. If she had only once been critical or disloyal to him in the past, he would have suffered silently in this supreme crisis of his life, being too proud to risk her disapproval a second time. But because she had shown over and over again that she was unshakably at his side in everything he undertook, he was able to turn to her with complete trust and certainty. The crisis spanned the period when they were

together at Simla, and there are few letters to record how much he owed to her at this time. But in the spring of 1905, he composed for her this poem, which summed up all his gratitude for what she had become:

*I would have torn the stars from the heavens for your necklace,
I would have stripped the rose-leaves for your couch from all the trees,
I would have spoiled the East of its spices for your perfume,
The West of all its wonders to endower you with these.
I would have drained the oceans, to find the rarest pearl-drops,
And melt them for your lightest thirst in ruby draughts of wine:
I would have dug for gold till the Earth was void of treasure,
That, since you had no riches, you might freely take of mine.
I would have drilled the sunbeams to guard you through the daytime,
I would have caged the nightingales to lull you to your rest;
But love was all you asked for, in waking or in sleeping,
And love I gave you, Sweetheart, at my side and on my breast.*

The causes of the crisis will be explained later, but it is first necessary to say something about the change that had come over Curzon during his six years in India, for his character, both in its strength and its weakness, contributed to his downfall. To many of his staff, particularly to those closest to him, he was not only a genius, but a loveable genius. When his Secretary, Sir Walter Lawrence, left India in 1903, he wrote to Curzon: 'I feel absolutely broken and dejected at the idea of leaving you. Whatever the future may hold – and it seems dreary and empty enough now – I shall never have a chief whom I shall admire and love as I have admired you.' Another of his staff, Sir Evan Maconochie, said that he was 'the greatest Indian Viceroy of our times – possibly of all times – fearless, creative, ardent, human . . . His were great days, and to us who knew and served under him they are a treasured memory.' These are tributes normally paid only to great Captains in war. It is impossible to imagine them addressed, even sycophantically, to Viceroys like Elgin, Curzon's predecessor, or Minto, his successor. Curzon was not only great in his courage, his industry, his oratory and strength of will, but great in his feeling for history, his insistence on impartial justice, his noble concept of imperial duty. One

example is the trouble he took to save from utter decay the monuments of India's past, the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort at Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri, the Pearl Mosque at Lahore, the palace at Mandalay, the ruins of Bijapur. Let us pause here (for it is not irrelevant to his character) to quote his reply to a mean-minded critic who said that it was no business of a Christian Government to restore pagan monuments:

Art and beauty, and the reverence that is owing to all that has evoked human genius or has inspired human faith, are independent of creeds. . . . What is beautiful, what is historic, what tears the mask off the face of the past and helps us to read its riddles, and to look it in the eyes – these, and not the dogmas of a combative theology, are the principal criteria to which we must look.

He would not be dismayed to know that today he is remembered in India with more affection than any other Viceroy, not for his reforms, not even for his courage, but for reminding the Indians of what most of them had forgotten, that India had had a past as great as Britain's before the British came, and for saving the memorials of it for posterity.

It has been said that in the loftiest political sense he lacked imagination, because he would not admit that one day India would wish, and be entitled, to govern itself; that he was too deeply involved in the administration of the vast country to comprehend that the system which he strove so masterfully to perfect was based upon an unjustifiable premise. The Indians comprised about one-fifth of the human race, but they had no say in how they were governed. Once Curzon was asked to appoint an Indian, any Indian, to his Council. He replied shortly that none was qualified for it. When the President of the Indian Congress asked to see him in order to present its Resolutions, he refused. None of his predecessors had ever done so, and he did not wish to set an unfortunate precedent. David Dilks quotes another instance in his *Curzon in India*. One day the owner of a leading Indian newspaper said to Walter Lawrence: 'We do not ask for Home Rule now, nor in ten years, nor in twenty, but all we ask is that the Viceroy will not shut the door

of hope upon us. Ask him to say that perhaps in fifty years India may be self-governing.' Moved by his earnestness, Lawrence repeated his words to Curzon, who thought long before he replied: 'No I will say nothing, for it might embarrass my successor if I raised any hopes or expressed any opinion as to when self-government will come.' When Lawrence said that it must happen some day, Curzon answered, 'It will not come in my time and I cannot say what may happen in the future.'

The British were in India to benefit the Indians, he believed, and if the Indians tried to interfere, the only result would be chaos. They must be convinced that the British, 'the speck of foam upon a dark unfathomable ocean', knew best. He made no protest against the social ostracism of even the most highly educated natives. He never had a close Indian friend; nor did Mary. His attitude reflected what every Englishman then believed. If he had proclaimed a policy of gradual emancipation, he would have been denounced immediately at home and lost the confidence of all the British in India. He did not for one moment believe Lawrence's warning (in his autobiography) that British rule 'rests on an illusion of infallibility and invulnerability'. To Curzon it was no illusion, but a fact of life, a God-given and beneficial fact, that the strong were destined to rule the weak, and he was appointed to control the strong. In 1903 he had written to Lord George Hamilton: 'All my policy and my acts tend to rivet the British rule on to India and to postpone the long-for day of emancipation. I am an Imperialist, and Imperialism is fatal to all their hopes.' His finest exposition of that creed was contained in almost the last speech he made in India:

Let it be our ideal to fight for the right, to abhor the imperfect, the unjust or the mean, to swerve neither to the right hand nor to the left, to care nothing for flattery or applause or odium or abuse, never to let your enthusiasm be soured or your courage grow dim, but to remember that the Almighty has placed your hand on the greatest of his ploughs, in whose furrow the nations of the future are germinating and taking shape, to drive the blade a little forward in your time, and to feel that somewhere among these millions you have left a little

justice or happiness or prosperity, a sense of manliness or moral dignity, a spring of patriotism, a dawn of intellectual enlightenment or a stirring of duty where it did not exist before – that is enough, that is the Englishman's justification in India. It is good enough for his watchword while he is here, for his epitaph when he is gone. Let India be my judge.

Curzon lived up to these high ideals without faltering, but he failed at the two levels where he might have been expected to succeed more easily, his relations with his own people at home and in India. He broke with the home Government by his reluctance to admit that the ultimate source of his authority lay in Whitehall; and he antagonized many of the British in India, those most remote from him, on whom the execution of his policies depended. The Army continued to hold against him incidents like the disgrace of the 9th Lancers. The junior officials were annoyed by his constant intervention in details of administration, and by his determination to challenge and change established practices. A lesser Viceroy could have won popularity by tacit consent. Curzon would never consent without interrogation. He wanted to improve, and improvement meant disturbance. It is the problem faced by any strong-willed Minister confronted by any conservative Civil Service. Things were running smoothly, which meant normally; an inquisitive and determined Viceroy created roughage. Therefore such a Viceroy, the argument ran, must be a bad Viceroy. Curzon possessed the capacity to persuade but not to conciliate. His bearing was aristocratic and alarming; he could be petulant and scornful. He seemed anxious to confirm his reputation as 'a superior person'. 'The world saw him as a caricature', wrote Lawrence, 'and unfortunately he was apt to play up to the caricature'. His most unattractive quality was his self-pity: his conviction that he was badly served, that his colleagues betrayed him, that his load of work was due entirely to the incompetence of his staff. His temper was exacerbated by the strain he put upon himself, and by the climate. The charm to which his intimate friends, particularly women, all paid tribute, was not evident in his dealings with his subordinates. Margot Asquith despaired that he

totality of his achievement in India, and several public men like Winston Churchill spoke out warmly in his defence. The Government maintained an attitude of cold aloofness, and when a public banquet was proposed in Curzon's honour, it was abandoned at his request because no Conservative ex-Minister would attend.

The Liberal Government under Campbell-Bannerman, which replaced Balfour's on the very day after Curzon's return, was equally distant. Curzon was refused the Earldom which had been given almost automatically to past Viceroy's on their retirement, although the King had personally requested it, and indeed promised it to Curzon in 1904. The outgoing Prime Minister, Balfour, feared that the honour might be regarded as a repudiation of Brodrick and Kitchener. The incoming Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, did not feel able to reward a man who had been cold-shouldered by his own party, when Liberals, too, 'had not always viewed with sympathy the methods and actions of Lord Curzon.' His humiliation was complete. He was invited by several constituencies to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming General Election, but he accepted none of them, because Balfour, in a painful interview, refused his active support, and Curzon's health was not good enough to stand the strain of a contested election.

After less than three weeks in England, he and Mary went to the South of France to join their children, who had remained there on their way back from India when London was thought to be too cold. They stayed first in a hotel at Cap St Martin, and then, because the rooms were too expensive and the food bad, they moved to another hotel near Cannes. Curzon was occupied with editing some of his Indian speeches for publication, and Mary with her children and her books. They saw few people whom they knew, and avoided those they didn't, reading the *Daily Mail*, two days in arrears, to discover what parties they had been fortunate enough to miss. Their only excursions were daily drives. They did not return to England until March 1906.

During this period Mary's health fluctuated no more alarmingly than it had at frequent intervals in India. When she first

arrived at Cap St Martin she had influenza and a cough 'which shook my bones to pieces', and her heart was giving trouble. At the least exertion, she told her mother, such as dressing or going upstairs, she became breathless. She consulted a specialist who assured her 'that I am good for many years of life with care', and Curzon wrote to Mrs Craigie, 'Mary is wonderfully well, but has a little leg trouble'. These various symptoms caused him some anxiety. Mrs Craigie saw her in London in April, and reassured Mrs Leiter that 'Mary is looking splendidly – you would be delighted by her appearance', but this was not the whole truth, because Mrs Craigie wrote to Curzon after Mary's death: 'I had forebodings even when I saw her apparently so well in April. I *knew* that she was not herself – that unconquerable will was doing the work of her physical strength. I said nothing. I am sure I betrayed nothing of my inward sorrow. I came away in profound distress.' Curzon himself, only a few days after her death, wrote to Schomberg McDonnell, 'I had seen it coming, and dared not avow it to her or even to myself.'

On 12 June Mary wrote to her brother Joe, 'I sometimes fear and feel I shall never be well again', but in the same letter she told him of her plan to come with Curzon to America to discuss financial matters, and she continued to be quite active socially throughout the early summer, though still suffering from 'devilish ills', which she did not specify. The words occur in the last letter she wrote to Curzon, on 7 July. They were both at 1 Carlton House Terrace, and she put the letter on his pillow:

You have, I know, in your patient and generous heart forgiven me for being so naughty yesterday, but I can give you no conception of how much more I hurt myself than I hurt you. But yesterday was one of those rare days that I felt I was going out of my mind and I really reached the lowest ebb of misery. That is why I kept so still when you came in before dinner. I didnt want to break down. But when you had gone out, I collapsed and cried the whole night. I was awake when you opened the door, but it was better that you should think me asleep than see the depths I was in. I wont let my nerve go if I can keep it, but what causes me such acute agony is that I should be a burden to you whom I worship, just when I would give my very soul to be a help.

I will be brave, beloved, and when I am naughty, you will know it isn't your Kinkie but all these devilish ills! There is plenty of hope and light ahead, and I won't always add to the shadows in Pappy's life, but pray that I may yet bring him the sun in all its glory. Love. M.'

Curzon also preserved his reply:

Precious darling, When I came up, I found Kinkie's loving letter which sent me crying to bed. I had forgotten all about Friday. The only wonder is that with all you have had and have to go through, you keep such a wonderful courage and such a sweet temper. I think of nothing but getting you right so that we may both lift our heads again and go ahead. Nothing else matters but to make my darling well again, and then if she is happy, my cup will brim over. Ever loving Pappy.

Ten days later, on 18 July 1906, she died at Carlton House Terrace. She was thirty-six years old.

She had had a restless night, Curzon told Mrs Leiter, and her health and spirits were so low that he spent the whole day at her bedside, watching her strength ebb. The doctors kept her alive with oxygen and injections of strychnine, but her breathing collapsed in the late afternoon, and her last fierce struggle was unavailing. She died just before 6 p.m. of a heart-attack, the bulletin said. Curzon's arm was around her in the final moments. The room was locked, and nobody, not even Curzon, re-entered it until she had been placed next day in her coffin, his photograph in her hand and a single flower on her breast.

She was buried at Kedleston, as she had requested when she lay ill at Walmer, and in the same hour a memorial service was held in London at St Margaret's, Westminster, attended by all her friends. At Kedleston her coffin had lain all the previous night in the Marble Hall. The only people at the funeral were Curzon himself, his three daughters, his father and brothers, Mrs Leiter, Daisy Suffolk, and Bishop Welldon who conducted the service. Among the many wreaths were tributes from the King and Queen and the President of the United States.

Curzon received over 1,150 letters of condolence, and replied

to most of them in his own hand. For many days it was his only occupation and consolation. All the letters expressed the writers' sense of shock. They had not known that Mary was so unwell. Her recovery in 1904 had seemed to them not so much a warning that she would die young, as evidence of her indomitable strength. Of her nature, most of her friends wrote that she was above all deeply sympathetic. Her beauty, grace and charm were known to all. But that she was loving too was a quality which took time to discover, for she was intensely reserved. Pearl Craigie, who was herself to die a month later aged thirty-eight, put it best: 'You can always know that Mary's life brilliantly fulfilled her hopes for you and for herself. Her absolute devotion to you was the first cause of my loving her; afterwards I loved her for herself also. To me she was the most precious and beloved of my women friends. There was never anything but a most exquisite generous tenderness and understanding in her.' Ettie Grenfell wrote: 'She was the best and most beautiful of all. There was no one like Mary. She had that innate dignity of nature that seems to set certain people quite apart, and one was never with her without feeling better and happier.'

Many others recalled acts of kindness: to a daughter lonely in India, to a woman in childbirth. The word 'noble' was often used, and people wrote of her 'beautiful light presence', and how she lived her life 'radiantly'. There can be no question of the genuineness of their grief and admiration. One does not write eulogies of a man's dead wife which will strike him as absurd. If there is no emotion, the easy refuge is in formal sympathy. Curzon received many of that character, but all the letters from people who had known her well still convey the sense of the writers' missed heart-beat when they heard of Mary's death. 'What a world of sunniness has gone', wrote Evan Charteris. And Henry Adams: 'I cannot talk of her. What you would say, I would only repeat. Some visions are too radiant for words. When they fade they leave life colourless.'

All this was true of Mary Curzon, as it was true of Mary Leiter. Proud and reserved as she was, she was never contemptuous or austere. American she remained at heart, but through

her husband she came to respect the British. She wanted, deserved and fulfilled a great role in life, and her enjoyment of it was earned by her sustained effort to survive its tribulations. She was not a brilliant woman. If she had been, she would never have suffered three years of misery, loneliness and frustration in London after her marriage. Later she would have left a deeper mark on the politics and intellectual life of India. Mary lacked dominance; and to some extent, as I have tried to show, she lacked judgment. When she was given a role, as a debutante in Washington, as a Vicereine in India, she played the part to perfection. Without it she was apt to falter.

The purpose and triumph of her life was to be loved by such a man as George Curzon. If I have read the evidence correctly, he did not love her deeply when he proposed to her, nor when he married her. The fullness of his love came in India. There he needed someone, as Lord Ronaldshay has said, to whom he could bring the spoils of victory. Still more, when failure dogged his footsteps, must he have someone to whom he could lay bare his soul. In India, where other intimacies were denied to him, he turned with increasing dependence and delight to the one source of comfort which was open to him. She responded with a warmth and solicitude which was totally unforced. 'There is no happiness so great to a woman,' she wrote, 'as the admiration she can feel to the depths of her heart for her Belovedest.' When he heard that she was returning to him from Highcliffe, he sent up a shout of joy which still echoes: 'This will be like beginning life again after a hideous interlude and all my efforts will be directed to make the new life happy and sweet – happier and sweeter if possible than the old. Every night and morning I thank God that you are coming out.' It is impossible to judge this difficult, complex man correctly if one ignores his capacity for joy and love, which Mary, more than any other woman in his life, awoke in him.

It took Curzon many years to recover from her loss. On the day after her death, he wrote to Mrs Leiter: 'There has gone from me the truest, the most devoted, most unselfish, most beautiful and brilliant wife a man has ever had, and I am left with three