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ARISTOCRATIC CRUMBLE — CAUSED BY A CANADIAN

IN THE HEART OF MAYFAIR is Curzon Street and Curzon Theatre in red neon lights: a feeble flare for a great aristocrat who missed becoming prime minister by the merest hair. At the height of his career he was unintentionally toppled . . . by a Canadian.

Lord Curzon!

Even now his record at Eton is unequalled. He won prizes in almost everything, and more at Oxford. "He stood out at once", writes Winston Churchill, "as one endowed with superabundant powers. At 21 he was *The Coming Man*". At 26 he defeated a sitting Member and became an M.P.

In chairs and hammocks, on horseback, elephantback and steamer, he toured Asia—first studying every book available—visiting kings and emperors and especially the Shah of Persia. Twice he travelled around the world reporting long articles for *The Times* and a syndicate. His subsequent book on Russia provoked much interest and approval; and his next, 1,300 pages on Persia, prompted fervent praise and has remained a standard authority.

He married a rich, cultivated American, Mary Leiter, and was appointed undersecretary to the Prime Minister. Twice Curzon suggested that he would be an able viceroy of India. Two years later, at 39, he received the appointment, the youngest Viceroy in history.

Twenty British soldiers emerged drunk from a Rangoon bootlegger's and in turn raped an elderly Burmese in an open space in broad daylight. Her screams attracted attention. She was left more dead than alive. At the court martial witnesses were dissuaded from giving evidence and the accused privates of the West Kent Regiment were acquitted. Rangoon, Burma, was part of

Curzon's Indian domain. Typically and quickly he had the accused dismissed from the Army and returned in disgrace to England, their sergeant major reduced to the ranks, their colonel dismissed, and the entire Regiment moved at a moment's notice to the most undesirable billet in South Arabia. Then he leaked the story to the Indian press. "Keep your face like flint and sweep every gutter, whatever the stink it causes, and take the public into your confidence". Such was his creed. One official claimed Curzon was the greatest Viceroy, possibly of all time.

His wife, whom he adored, died.

Curzon had a most presentable home in London at 1 Carlton House Terrace and his family estate, an enormous mansion, Kedleston, in Norfolk. He leased a big country house, Hackwood, in Berkshire, for weekend parties; and later another, huge Montacute House, in Somerset. A photograph of Tattersall Castle, Norfolk, which he saw in *Country Life* magazine, fired his imagination. After a visit he bought it for a bargain, £12,000, and with great relish set about its restoration, retrieving from a dealer its mantlepieces, about to be shipped to America. In India he had restored the Taj Mahal to its pristine glory. Improving homes was his favourite hobby. "He climbs fully clothed into baths, to test their length, first lining them with newspapers", remarked his plumber at Kedleston. Later he bought Bodiam Castle in Sussex. As a rule George Nathaniel Curzon had a place to sleep somewhere.

Every morning at Carlton House Terrace all servants were lined up for inspection of uniform and the state of their fingernails. On learning that a housemaid had allowed a footman to spend the night with her, Curzon "put the little slut right out on the street", as he remarked afterwards. A housemaid who had broken a vase he fired at once. "Go, girl, go", he said, and then, suddenly relenting, hurried out and retrieved her.

His most congenial demeanour appeared at parties. Usually gay and rather fond of risqué stories, he excelled as a host. "He was never happier", affirms Winston Churchill, "than when he dispensed the splendid hospitalities of his various palatial homes". Tall, handsome, princely in manner, now a widower whose political star was on the ascendant, he posed a whale of a catch to the ladies. Friends paraded candidates. The usual hooks were cast. The ascending whale, however, was not easily caught.

Then it happened, casually at first. One night at a party a ravishing redhead riveted his attention. "Who", he enquired, "is she?"

She was Elinor Glyn.

Elinor's father, Douglas Sutherland, a Scottish engineer of proud aristocratic descent, was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia. Her mother, also of noble lineage, was raised in Guelph, Ontario, on her family farm, Woodlands, which actually became the present Ontario Agricultural College. And Elinor, born in England, was taught controlled, courtly manners, and to appreciate her noble ancestry.

Now, in London, Elinor Glyn had become a writer of some renown (perhaps notoriety is the better word). Her publishers, reprinting as fast as possible, could scarce keep up with the demand for her current novel, entitled *Three Weeks*, a worldwide best-seller which ultimately sold nearly five million copies. Its astonishing popularity was probably due, chiefly, to a long love scene depicted on a tiger skin. A brief verse was going the rounds in London and Curzon must have heard it: "Would you care to sin, with Elinor Glyn, on a tiger skin; or would you prefer, to err with her, on some other fur?" *Three Weeks* was presented on the stage, Elinor herself playing the passionate heroine. After seeing the play Curzon wrote her a polite letter of appreciation and sent her a tiger skin, and she replied, warmly, and gradually came to live, from time to time, at one or other of his homes. And he visited hers.

Though he made no promises, he gave her a splendid diamond and sapphire ring. She could not marry because her husband, Clayton Glyn—husband in name only—an alcoholic gambler and grouse-hunter who had squandered a fortune, was still alive. The impassioned affair between Elinor and Curzon continued for more than eight years; he wrote her nearly 500 letters. Clayton Glyn died. Elinor informed Curzon. He replied by sending his deepest condolences. Then one morning at Curzon's Montacute House, where Elinor had been spending the winter, she read in *The Times* the announcement of the engagement of Lord Curzon of Kedleston and Mrs. Alfred Duggan, a widowed American millionairess. Curzon had been secretly courting Mrs. Duggan for months. He did not write to warn Elinor. Nor did he write to her later. He severed himself, in public, with one swift swing of the axe. Mrs. Duggan was 36. She was beautiful. And for Curzon to maintain the grandiose fashion befitting his rank, his inherited and acquired estates, he needed more money. Elinor burned his letters.

George Nathaniel Curzon, skimming lightly over the years, became Chancellor of Oxford University, Leader of the House of Lords, Cabinet Minister, Foreign Minister, and deputy Prime Minister. And it was, indeed, while presiding over Cabinet meetings that a much more terrible axe hovered over his own head. Softly now, almost on tip-toe, a Canadian enters the scene.

He was Andrew Bonar Law, a quiet, able man who had been Conservative Leader in the Lloyd George Coalition Government. Law, none too well, had retired. Quite suddenly the Coalition Government cracked right open because the Conservatives, most of them, wished to withdraw and revert to an independent Conservative party. In caucus, they voted, 187-87, for Law to be their Leader. Having elicited approval from his doctor, Law accepted, reluctantly, for a limited period. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, unable to proceed without the Conservatives, resigned at once and asked the King to send for Law. Hence Law became Prime Minister.

Curzon, as usual, was careful. One foot on one horse, one on the other: hold it on the bend: then back the winner. This was his strategy. He stayed away from the caucus, waiting to see who won the votes. Law won. Then Curzon, who had been Foreign Minister under Lloyd George, agreed to continue as Foreign Minister under Law.

The sizzling question was this. Could the Canadian Prime Minister win an election? Law himself was gloomy and pessimistic. And because others shared this view he had difficulty in forming a Cabinet. He formed one and won the election with a clear majority of more than 70 seats (the total Coalition majority had been 57). This amazed Winston Churchill and others, losing their seats, who had expected ruin for Law.

Ruin, nonetheless, appeared. One morning in the House of Commons, mere months later, Law could not speak. His voice failed. And his doctor, Sir Thomas Horder, suggested a complete rest and change. Even after a lengthy cruise and further holiday in Switzerland, Law returned to London, still ill. Unknowingly he had cancer of the throat and an estimated six months to live.

He knew his own feelings. He was ill. And he resolved to resign: an easy matter and a great relief. The racking question that gnawed at his mind was who to commend to the King? By custom the reigning monarch asks a resigning prime minister to name a successor. Lloyd George had named Law, which was easy; there was no alternative. But now a painful predicament confronted Law.

Salient as a mountain above all others, in sheer ability and experience, was Curzon. Though he had, of course, his faults. He was temperamental and autocratic. He had been Viceroy for seven years, in the Cabinet for eight; and at the moment was deputy Prime Minister. What tipped the scales in Law's mind was a letter. A certain Lord X---- had asked the Prime Minister if the Government had any objection to his making a loan to Turkey before

the peace was signed. Law could see no objection. He so informed his Foreign Secretary and sought his confirmation.

Curzon replied that Lord X---- should have applied to the Foreign Office in the first place; that he knew all about Lord X----, who had deserted his wife, a charming lady, for another woman; that he had been involved in shady financial transactions and had had to sell his house; that anyone should be allowed to lend to Turkey was doubtful policy; that Lord X---- should be allowed was out of the question; and that, again, such matters should always be directed to the Foreign Office.

Smoking his pipe, Bonar Law, usually imperturbable, looked at the letter. An unbridled outburst! About a petty loan! A loan he had already sanctioned! It shook him. He had never told Curzon how his letter had shook him. He felt he should not entrust the destiny of Britain to one who could become so inflamed over such a trivial matter. Although Law believed the King would choose Curzon anyway, Law would not name him. Then who? The only alternative was Stanley Baldwin, whom Law liked personally; but he was too inexperienced. What to do? Nothing. Law would name no one. His present illness would be a valid excuse to the King.

Precisely thus instructed, J. C. C. Davidson, Law's Parliamentary private secretary, explained the matter by telephone to Lord Stamfordham, the King's private secretary. Stamfordham asked Davidson if he, personally, as a well-informed back-bencher, would care to submit his own views. Davidson said he would. Davidson appraised Curzon and Baldwin in a long memorandum, stating chiefly that in this democratic age it would seem advisable for a prime minister to be in the House of Commons. Did Davidson deliver this to Stamfordham or to the King? He did not.

The memorandum, of which Law knew nothing, together with Law's letter of resignation, were conveyed to the King by Colonel Ronald Waterhouse, Law's principal private secretary. That morning Waterhouse had queried Law: If the King asked for his advice, who would he choose? Law replied that he would refuse. Further pressed for an answer, Law remained silent. When Waterhouse promised to preserve his confidence, Law said, "In that case . . . I am afraid . . . I would have to say—Baldwin". This was passed on by Waterhouse who told Stamfordham that Davidson's memorandum presented "practically the views of Bonar Law". Stamfordham attached a note to the memorandum to this effect.

Two more big guns boomed, quietly, inside the Palace. The salvoes came from Lord Salisbury, Lord President of the Council, and Lord (J. H.)

Balfour, a former prime minister, both hastily summoned by the King for advice. Salisbury hustled up from Devon on an early morning milk train and appealed strongly for Curzon.

In Norfolk, Balfour, confined to bed with phlebitis, rose against doctors' orders and journeyed to London. It should be mentioned that Balfour and Curzon, each of great estate, born to rule and hatched from the same Eton incubator, differed mainly in that Balfour was an easy-going man and Curzon a hard one. Their views often clashed and each could ill suffer the sight of the other strutting about on the same lawn: a smouldering hostility not always smothered. And now, in London, Balfour, mentioning no names, simply said he wondered whether, at the moment, it would be wise to foist a prime minister from the Lords? He thought not. Back in Norfolk that evening, a lady enquired, "And will dear George be chosen?" "No", replied Balfour, "dear George will not."

Of these, and lesser manoeuvrings, which all occurred on a weekend, Law knew nothing. Nor did Curzon. He and his wife had gone, as usual, to Montacute House in Somerset, confidently awaiting a summons from the Palace. He got it. On Monday evening the Montacute post office received a telegram from the King's secretary urgently summoning him to London. There being no telephone at Mantacute House, the village policeman was enlisted to convey it at once. Curzon read the message and sighed. How long and hard had he toiled with this supreme objective in view! The long years of waiting were over. "The summons", he said to his wife, "it has come."

Chattering villagers caused a considerable crowd to cheer the nobles aboard the train on Tuesday morning. And more, including photographers, filled the station platform at Yeovil, where they changed trains. Lady Curzon, who particularly enjoyed entertaining, spoke of the dinners and balls she would give. They agreed to use 10 Downing Street for official receptions only: all other entertaining at 1 Carlton House Terrace. A horde of photographers confronted the couple at Paddington Station, and more at Carlton House Terrace. It was wonderful and thrilling, the realization of a long-awaited dream.

At home a note from the Palace stated that Lord Stamfordham would call at 2.30 p.m. Just before lunch a Conservative M.P. arrived with a message from Austen (Coalition) Chamberlain and his friends. Over sherry the M.P. affirmed "they earnestly hope for your appointment and would willingly serve under you but not under Baldwin". Curzon, now in commanding position, replied that one of his first acts as prime minister would be to heal the breach

by asking Chamberlain to rejoin the party. The M.P. left. The commanding officer and his wife proceeded to lunch.

Promptly at 2.30 Lord Stamfordham was announced and Curzon asked Grace to remain in the room to hear the summons herself. Stamfordham was obviously embarrassed and when he spoke he faltered: “. . . the King . . . appreciates your . . . pre-eminent claims . . . His Majesty considers you in every way qualified . . . but he believes that because the greatest Opposition is Labour, which is not represented in the House of Lords, the prime minister must be in the House of Commons where he can answer the Labour leader. The King has, therefore, decided to appoint Baldwin . . .”

Without interrupting, Curzon listened to a long discourse. He was stunned. For some moments he could not speak. He glanced at Grace and back at Stamfordham, and at length replied, “This is the greatest blow and slur on me and my career that I had ever conceived . . .” (He did not know that Baldwin was already on his way to see the King at 3.15). Curzon forgave Stamfordham for raising false hopes; he said he understood he had had to summon him to London to inform him of the King's choice before it became public.

Unexpectedly, Curzon agreed to continue as Foreign Secretary under Baldwin and a few days later proposed the new Prime Minister in a graceful, magnanimous speech. Less than two years later he died, some said of a broken heart.

Perhaps the most extraordinary fact is that Law and Baldwin, quiet and modest men, neither wanted nor expected to be prime minister. They got it. Curzon, a hard proud man, applied his unrivalled talents and every stratagem throughout the better part of his career, if not the whole of it, towards that objective: and missed it: undermining his own best hope by writing a sharp letter on a trivial matter to his prime minister, a Canadian from New Brunswick.