The Death of Henry George: Scholar or Statesman?

Author(s): Jack Schwartzman

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The Death of Henry George: Scholar or Statesman?

By Jack Schwartzman*

ABSTRACT. Henry George was determined to complete his book on political economy (subsequently published as *The Science of Political Economy*) but in March 1897 his health began to deteriorate. Ignoring doctors' warnings George continued to work on his project and in June of 1897, George, as if not having enough to do, accepted the nomination to run for Mayor of Greater New York. At the night of his acceptance of the nomination George was already thin of body; and his face was ashen. Five days before the election, on October 28, 1897, George succumbed to the inevitable and was buried on November 1, 1897. His passing provoked a hundred thousand citizens to pass before his bier, and in so doing the crowd vindicated George's lifelong idea of the brotherhood of man.

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Introduction

IN 1897, THE ECONOMIST HENRY GEORGE was obsessed with two desires: 1) He wished to finish what he thought would be his masterpiece, *The Science of Political Economy*; and 2) he wished to run (for the second time) for the office of Mayor of the City of New York. Even though he was in poor health, he ardently believed he would live to see his wishes realized. Unfortunately, he failed. He achieved neither goal. The following is the tragic story of George's last year on earth.

* Dr. Jack Schwartzman is retired both as a New York attorney and as Professor Emeritus from Nassau Community College in New York, where he taught English for thirty years (1964–1994). He is the author of *Rebels of Individualism* (1949) and continues on as editor-in-chief of *Fragments*, an international individualist magazine. Born in the Ukraine in 1912, Dr. Schwartzman vows to continue "writing and speaking—to the end of his days." [And we look forward to many additional wonderful contributions from Dr. Schwartzman in the years ahead! –Ed.]

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The Year 1897

"THE YEAR 1897," wrote one of George's biographers, "opened sadly for George. He had a temporary breakdown in health, and this was followed by a stunning domestic calamity. His older daughter, Jennie, now married, died with startling suddenness while on a visit to her parents. Sickness, bereavement, and the dreariness of the political outlook gave George's thoughts a melancholy tinge. He began to be oppressed by a sense of failure."

"Even though he was only fifty-eight, George was beginning to feel old. "While organically sound," observed his son, "the iron constitution with which he had started out was perceptibly weakening under the incessant toil since boyhood and the extraordinary strain of the last sixteen years in putting the breath of life into a world-wide movement and inspiring it with his own passionate enthusiasm. He became conscious as he travelled about . . . that he had lost his old physical elasticity, and he found it required an effort to get back to the newspaper habits of his younger days It seemed to him . . . that the century was closing in darkness, that the principle of democracy, which triumphed in 1800 with the ascendancy of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency of the United States, might be conquered by the Hamiltonian principle of aristocracy and plutocracy in 1900."²

In 1895, George moved to Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, to a house which was the property of his close friend, the noted industrialist/politician, Tom Johnson. It was a refreshing change from the gloomy squalor of East 19th Street in Manhattan. "The tonic of a change was very necessary to George at this time. He had much to discourage him. Public interest in himself and his theories had faded, and a blight seems to have descended on the single tax movement [which] had lost its power to capture popular support The single tax forces were scattered and dispirited." "

Thoughts of death were often in George's mind. His second son, Richard, who was a sculptor, was at work on a bust of his father one day, and the other son, George, Jr., was also present. Their father suddenly said: "When I am dead, you boys will have this bust to carry in my funeral procession, as was the custom with the Romans."

However, George never lost his basic optimism. "The great, the very

great advancement of our ideas," he declared "may not show now, but it will. And it will show more after my death than during my life. Men who now hold back will then acknowledge that I have been speaking the truth."

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The Science of Political Economy

GEORGE WAS DETERMINED TO COMPLETE his book on political economy—his crowning achievement. "But while with an iron will he held himself to his work, he had not the old snap and vigor; and in March [1897] came what seemed like a severe bilious attack . . . Dr. Kelly gave warning that work must stop for awhile Mr. George would not listen . . . 'I must finish the book before anything else,' was the reply to all suggestions of cessation." At the same time, privately, he was beginning to have doubts. "Once or twice when conscious of physical weakness he had expressed to Mrs. George a doubt of being able to hold out to complete the work."

In addition to his physical fatigue, the criticism of those who were closest to him (and with whom he shared the chapters of his book) was beginning to disturb him a great deal. "Early in 1897, when George was estimating that he would probably need somewhat more than a year to finish, his intimates made comments which indicate them to have been baffled. Dr. [Edward] Taylor praised 'great thought' and elevation of tone, but said also that much of the manuscript seemed irrelevant But [Louis F.] Post wrote in brutal candor. The sentences were too long—one contained 275 words—and the whole treatment lacked sharpness. George must not let himself think that the work was anywhere done To the harsher criticisms, George's simple answer was that he would stick to his guns. 'I pit my own judgment against yours . . . and my own judgement is that this will be equal to *Progress and Poverty*.' "8

A Georgist philosopher analyzed *The Science of Political Economy*. Originally, it was supposed to be a primer of political economy, but "broadened under his hand, . . . it assumed the scope of a complete treatise on economics, a treatise that was to relate the science to all human activity. It was a more ambitious undertaking than anything he had hitherto written, . . . for George was to attempt not only to weld all the material that could be grouped under the shadowy classification of political economy into a uni-

fied and comprehensive system of thought, but, of more significance, also to form this refashioned science into a foundation for still another synthetic scheme of a universal philosophy."⁹

George kept writing his *Science of Political Economy*, but he was constantly interrupted—and kept his ear to the ground. His purpose, claimed his son, "was to allow nothing to interfere with the writing" of his book, "but the alignment of national parties drew him from his retirement and once more into the current of politics." George "consulted his doctors and was told that a campaign would probably kill him. But he did not refuse the nomination and meanwhile continued with his writing. Three weeks before the vote he was sending out chapters of criticism and suggestion" He preferred to "dramatize his career in an appeal to voters" rather than continue writing. ¹¹

The book was never finished. After George's death, it was published by George's son, in 1898, in its incomplete form. It received mixed reviews, most of them negative. Yet there are numerous scholarly Georgists today who hail the book as a permanent classic. "At his death," wrote a close friend and biographer, George left with his son "the last addition to his legacy to mankind. It is a systematic study of political economy—the phase of economics which deals with the social phenomena of mankind making a living." 12

A prominent Yale scholar wrote a much quoted (negative) review of George's last book:

Henry George was a great preacher. *Progress and Poverty* is one of the most eloquent volumes of sermons which has appeared in the English language. But in proportion as George passes from the field of oratory into the field of science, his work becomes less good. He criticizes his predecessors with no sparing hand, but he lays himself open to the same kind of criticism in far greater measures than they do. With all its claims of novelty . . . [*The Science of Political Economy*] has little which is really new, unless it be a somewhat commonplace metaphysics within which the author tries to frame his economic system. . . . This is not the first time a good preacher has proved himself a poor conversationalist. Those of us who have admired George for his brilliant earlier work and for his unblemished personal character can only regret that this last book was ever written and desire that it may be forgotten as soon as possible. ¹³

For his review, Hadley was lavishly praised by Barker, and mildly criticized by Edward J. Rose, who also added his comment:

The Science of Political Economy is not a whole book The book is partly

autobiographical, partly critical, partly historical, and partly a review of *Progress and Poverty* and its reception by those for and against him. There is little in it that is truly new so far as George's religio-economic thinking is concerned. It is not the definitive statement of his views that he wished to write, and it suffers from the many interruptions that caused it to be set aside for other matters and events of equal interest to its author during its composition. Nevertheless, it is well argued and well written, deserving the praise that Georgists have given it.¹⁴

Another negative review of George's book follows:

In the form in which he [Henry George] left it, The *Science of Political Economy* must be pronounced meagre, fragmentary, and disappointing. It does not live up to its title. Important departments of economics are left unexplored; contemporary developments of economic thought are neglected; ancient heresies like the labor theory of value are revived; the reader is served up with a queer blend of eighteenth-century philosophy and nineteenth-century radicalism. George was not fully conscious of all these faults, but he could not help feeling that something had gone wrong with his monumental work on political economy. Instead of a crowning achievement, it looked like becoming the most pitiful of anticlimaxes. Yet he had no choice but to toil on. His friends were impatiently waiting for the book that was to put the copingstone on the single tax edifice, and he could not share with them his dread that he was ploughing the sands. Death came at last to end a tragic situation. George received a second invitation to stand for New York mayoralty. With relief he flung aside his unfinished manuscript and plunged desperately into the battle that cost him his life. 15

"Partial" approval came from another source. "In view of our criticism of George on the law of diminishing returns . . . , the following must be said: he was absolutely correct in contending that the principle applies to industry as well as to agriculture." ¹⁶

Barker did not think much of the book. "Unquestionably *The Science of Political Economy*, as Henry George, Jr., had it published in 1898, does not satisfy his father's first plan or the recent choice of title. Just as certainly, . . . it does contain passages of eloquence and of great logical power.

"As a treatise for students and reviewers, *The Science of Political Economy* received about what its frailties deserved, not much consideration in the journals." ¹⁷

A characteristic defense of the book and a bitter attack on the political "option" that George chose came from the illustrious Albert Jay Nock. He argued:

In 1891, speaking of his projected work on the science of political economy, he [Henry George] wrote a friend that he had long thought "perhaps it would be useful if I could put the ideas embodied in *Progress and Poverty* in the setting of a complete

economic treatise, and without controversy." Without controversy—there spoke the sound philosophical instinct, with what was virtually its dying breath. . . .

Seven years were none too many for such a task as his proposed work on political economy, and in all probability George might have had more than seven. If he had devoted even seven years to that work, assuming that he was to have but seven, what a work it might, nay, certainly would, have been! . . . But . . . then came the hopeless and preposterous campaign for the mayoralty of New York in 1897, which led directly to his death. ¹⁸

IV

To Run or Not to Run?

As EARLY AS JUNE, 1897, recalled George's son, "began the preliminary rumbling of fall politics. Various rumors were afloat that Henry George was to be asked to run as an independent candidate for the office of Mayor of the Greater New York which had just been formed by the absorption of Brooklyn and other adjoining municipalities, so that it now had become the second city in the world in respect to population." ¹⁹

In a matter of weeks, the anti-Tammany Democrats offered the nomination to George. "There were a hundred reasons," wrote a biographer, "why George should refuse. His health was bad; the contest would probably kill him; his great book was unfinished. But the old fighter could not resist the smell of gunpowder. One by one he set aside the objections of his friends. His book was practically finished. What he had written would clearly indicate the nature of his thought. His health was his own concern. He would gladly sacrifice it in the cause of duty His instinct was right. Better to go down fighting gloriously than to rust out in obscurity as he was doing. Death, if it came, would crown him with the martyr's halo. Posterity would inscribe his name on the great roll of those who died for their beliefs." ²⁰

George asked Dr. M. R. Leverson, an old friend and neighbor, what would be the "worst" that would happen to him if he accepted the nomination. Leverson replied: "Since you ask, you have a right to be told. It will most probably prove fatal." George continued: "You mean it may kill me?" "Most probably, yes." George's final comment was: "Dr. Kelly says the same thing, only more positively. But I have got to die. How can I die better than serving humanity? Besides, so dying will do more for the cause than anything I am likely to be able to do in the rest of my life." 21

When friends came to ask Henry George's wife to discourage him from running for Mayor, she replied:

"When I was a much younger woman I made up my mind to do all in my power to help my husband in his work, and now after many years I may say that I have never once crossed him in what he had seen clearly to be his duty. Should he decide to enter this campaign I shall do nothing to prevent him; but shall, on the contrary, do all I can to strengthen and encourage him. He must live his life in his own way and at whatever sacrifice his sense of duty requires; and I shall give him all I can—devotion."

"Annie George hesitated less than her husband had done," declared Barker, "and the decision brought no remorse. The family noticed that the candidate's old optimism came back, that his eye lit again and spring returned to his step. His pictures show an emaciated man, but those who knew him best recall a rekindled one." ²³

Both Henry George's son and his daughter vividly remembered the night of the nomination, October 5, 1897. When Henry George arose to accept the nomination, the son described, "he was not as he had been eleven years before—flushed with strength and vigor—but with thin body and ashen face. He had almost fainted on the way to the hall."²⁴

V

The Acceptance Speech

GEORGE'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH WAS delivered in a "low and slow" tone, and only his family knew the great physical effort that he had made to address the audience:

I have not sought this nomination. It has been repugnant to me. My line lay in a different path, and I had hoped to tread it; but I hold with Thomas Jefferson that while a citizen who can afford to should not seek office, no man can ignore the will of those with whom he stands when they have asked him to come to the front and represent a principle.

The office for which you name me gives me no power to carry out in full my views, but I can represent the men who think with me—men who think that all men are created equal; and whether it be success or failure matters nothing to me

No greater honor can be given to any man than to stand for all that. No greater service can he render to his day and generation than to lay at its feet whatever he has. I would not refuse if I died for it

What counts a few years? What can a man do better or nobler than something for his country, for his nation, for his age?

I accept your nomination without wavering or turning, whether those who stand with me be few or many. From henceforward I am your candidate for the Mayoralty of Greater New York.²⁵

Thus began the campaign which would end on November 2, a little over three weeks later. "They were three weeks of happiness for Henry George. The breath of battle had entered into his nostrils, and when occasion called, roused to something like former strength his lion's soul. He had seriously agreed at the outset that he would make only three, four or five speeches during the whole canvass; but soon he had swept this aside as an idle resolve, until, by his own will, he was speaking at three, four and five meetings every night, more probably than the other candidates put together." ²⁶

Henry George's daughter, later to be known as Anna George de Mille, narrated an interesting incident concerning herself, which took place during the campaign. Speaking of herself in the third person, she stated:

Mrs. George had tickets for herself and her daughter entitling them to sit on the crowded platform. But it was only by using her name that they were able to enter the hall—pushed in through the mob by enthusiastic policemen who led them to places on the stage.

The girl knew nothing of the fears which George's doctors had expressed. She did not know the weight on her mother's heart. But in her own heart there grew a nameless fear when she saw her father (who had nearly fainted on the way to the meeting) advance to the speaker's stand. Now he stood before the sea of faces, his own face ashen, his once strong body now so frail. He stood there—looking as though he must drop, while the huge audience thundered applause and cheers.

("Dear God," prayed the girl, "support him. Do not let him fail. Give him strength.") At last the tumult ceased. Presently he spoke, his voice small, weak, almost inaudible, difficult to recognize as the voice of Henry George, the "orator," the "prodigy of platform eloquence." The girl muttered her prayer again.

Gradually a change came in the short, slight, weary man on the platform. He braced his shoulders, threw back his head in the old way, and almost in the old voice with almost the old ring, spoke staunchly.²⁷

Anna George de Mille continued with her story:

The next morning, Mrs. George asked her daughter, "Whatever were you doing last night while your father was making his speech? He says he could hardly think of what he wanted to say because he was so conscious of your eyes, staring at him." Even to her mother, the daughter felt too shy to say that she had been praying. And so she replied, questioningly, "How could he have seen me across that jam of people? I wasn't doing anything—just sitting there beside you." ²⁸

"Though his energies were limited," observed a biographer, "George fought an aggressive campaign and loved the fight." ²⁹

Louis F. Post, George's close friend and advisor, described the campaign:

Henry George began his campaign for Mayor of Greater New York with a brief acceptance speech in the familiar old Cooper Union Hall to an audience overflowing in numbers and boiling with enthusiasm The enthusiasm of that campaign . . . reminded me of the popularity of Henry George's candidacy . . . eleven years before, when the streets rang with the cry of "George! George! Hen-ry George!" I was also reminded . . . of a conversation with Henry George some seven or eight years after his campaigns of 1886 . . . and . . . 1887 . . . "How hard it is to realize," he said, "now that my name seems to have been forgotten by the general public, that no longer than in 1886 and 1887 great crowds were surging by the park cottage . . . , shouting "George! George! Henry George!" It was indeed hard to realize. But harder yet would it then have been to realize that in 1897, only three or four years in the future, similar crowds, though larger and if possible more enthusiastic, would be acclaiming the very man who had thus been popularly exalted and then popularly forgotten!³⁰

A Georgist scholar commented: "The first flush of the campaign, the smell of battle, this righteous war of his, seemed to summon forth the shadow of his former strength, and for three weeks he carried on a last desperate fight, speaking often at half a dozen meetings in an evening." ³¹

VI

The Last Night

"AND THEN CAME THE LAST NIGHT," reported George's son, "Thursday, October 28—five days before election. Five speeches had been planned, but the places were so far apart that the last had to be declared off, and as it was Mr. George did not get back to headquarters till near midnight.

"In Turner Hall, College Point, Mr. George next spoke He was introduced as 'the great friend of labor and Democracy.' His first utterance was one of dissent.

"I have never claimed to be a special friend of labor. Let us have done with this call for special privileges for labor. Labor does not want special privileges. I have never advocated nor asked for special rights or special sympathy for working men!

"'What I stand for is the equal rights of all men!"32

George's last speech . . . was at the Manhattan Opera House. As a biographer described it, George "arrived there after most of the crowd had

left, and he rambled on in a way that distressed the audience that remained. Mrs. George, who always accompanied him, got him back to the Union Square Hotel at midnight."³³

"Some of the friends spoke of the pallor and extreme fatigue showing in Mr. George's face Before retiring he complained to his wife of a slight feeling of indigestion, and she waked in the early morning hours to find that he had arisen from his bed. She called and he answered that he was well, but he did not return to bed. After a time she arose and found him in an adjoining room of their suite. He was standing, one hand on a chair, as if to support himself. His face was white; his body rigid like a statue; his shoulders thrown back, his head up, his eyes wide open and penetrating, as if they saw something; and then one word came—'Yes'—many times repeated, at first with a quiet emphasis, then with the vigor of his heart's force, sinking to softness as Mrs. George gently drew him back to his couch. He moved mechanically and awkwardly, as though his mind was intently engaged, and little conscious of things about him."³⁴

Speaking of himself in the third person, George's son wrote: "The elder son, the only other member of the family in the hotel, was called, and then Dr. [James E.] Kelly and Mr. [August] Lewis and Mr. [Tom L.] Johnson, who lived close at hand. Mr. George was entirely unconscious when Dr. Kelly arrived. A stroke of apoplexy had fallen. The great heart had worn out the physical body, and a thread in the brain had snapped. The physician's sympathy went out to the wife, and then in utter helplessness he cast himself face downward upon the floor. For at that moment Henry George's spirit was answering the call of the All-Father." 35

According to George's daughter, The *New York Journal* reported the next day:

The figure of Mr. George on his last night on earth was one of remarkable pathos. The crowd at Whitestone noticed it and did not know what to make of it. The people seemed afraid to make a noise. They did not know what it was, this indefinable something in Mr. George's manner and voice.

His manner can best be conveyed by imagining a martyr, racked with wounds for conscience's sake, speaking to the people, while his soul was far away looking on other scenes. To one who never saw Mr. George, and upon whom this air had not grown gradually, the effect was startling, for he seemed more like a racked and wounded saint than a man stumping for political office.³⁶

"Henry George's death shocked everyone," stated one writer, "except possibly George who had expected it would come soon and so prepared

himself. He had made his will the previous May in the presence of his two sons, leaving everything he had—little that it was—to his wife. The reactions of the world to his death indicate very well the impact and influence he had upon the world he so dramatically left behind."³⁷

VII

The Funeral

"ALL DAY SUNDAY," reported Henry George, Jr., "the body lay in state in the Grand Central Palace, with the bronze bust executed by the son Richard looking down upon the bier. From early morning old and young, poor and rich, passed to take a silent farewell 'Never for statesman or soldier,' said one of the press, 'was there so remarkable a demonstration of popular feeling. At least one hundred thousand persons passed before his bier and another hundred thousand were prevented from doing so only by the impossibility of getting near it. Unconsciously they vindicated over his dead body the truth of the great idea to which his life was devoted, the brotherhood of man.' "38"

Eulogizing Henry George, Father Edward McGlynn declared at the funeral:

He was not merely a philosopher and sage; he was a seer, a forerunner, a prophet; a teacher sent from God.... He had a lion's heart, the heart of a hero.... It was that loving heart of his that grieved over the sin and misery that he saw.... In the concluding chapters of that immortal work of his [*Progress and Poverty*] he makes a confession and a profession, and says that the faith that was dead in him revived.... That book is not merely political philosophy. It is a poem; it is a prophecy; it is a prayer.... When the names of the mayors of New York and the presidents of the United States will be but little more than catalogues of names..., in a niche in one of the walls of the ... parliament of nations, there shall be found honored, loved, and revered the name of Henry George.³⁹

Louis F. Post described the same event:

The service closed with Mr. [John S.] Crosby's address in the midst of tremendous and prolonged applause.

Applause? At a funeral? Yes!

There was no applause until Father McGlynn had been speaking for perhaps five minutes. Until then the silence was profound, except for an occasional sob

When Father McGlynn stood at the speakers' desk describing Henry George as a philosopher, a sage, a seer, a prophet, a messenger of truth, of righteousness, of justice, of peace, of fraternity . . . all sense of mere conventional propriety was lost to that audience, and it responded with general enthusiastic applause. 40

"Next morning—Monday, November 1, 1897—... the relatives and the intimates bore the body to Greenwood and lowered it at the chosen spot on the hill-crest, beside the beloved daughter. All was enveloped in the soft grey light of an autumn day, and beyond to the south lay the shimmering Atlantic.

"On the stone that his fellow-citizens soon raised there are fixed in metal letters these words from Henry George's first great book—words to which, after long years of labor, he bore final testimony with his life:

"The truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends—those who will toil for it; suffer for it; if need be, die for it. This is the power of Truth." 41

Post described the last scene.

"Those who, standing by our Prophet's [Henry George's] open grave on Ocean Hill in Greenwood Cemetery the first day of November, 1897, saw his body lowered into the ground and his elder son sprinkle upon the coffin lid a handful of earth from the grave-side, must have been stirred by the sentiment of these words in *Progress and Poverty* [page 136] about the progressive type of man:

"He turns his back upon the feast and renounces the place of power, he leaves it to others to accumulate wealth, to gratify pleasant tastes, to bask themselves in the warm sunshine of the brief day. He works for those he never saw and never can see; for a fame, or maybe but for a scant justice, that can only come after the clods have settled upon his coffin lid. He toils in the advance where it is cold, and there is little cheer from men, and the stones are sharp and the brambles thick. Amid the scoffs of the present and the sneers that stab like knives, he builds for the future; he cuts the trail that progressive humanity may hereafter broaden into a high road. Into bigger, grander spheres desire mounts and beckons, and a star that rises in the east leads him on."

"Of whom could those words have been more truly written, though he was innocent of any such self-centered thought, than of Henry George himself, our Prophet of San Francisco?" 42

VIII

Tributes

GEORGE'S SON WROTE: "Beyond party lines, Henry George's fellow-men gave him the acknowledgment he had said would come when he was dead. He

had made his fight the theatre of the world, and messages poured in 'He was a tribune of the people,' said a city paper not of his camp Said a paper of another faction: 'Stricken down in the moment of supremest confidence, Henry George, the idol of his people, is dead. He was more than a candidate for office, more than a politician, more than a statesman. He was a thinker whose work belongs to the world's literature. His death had carried mourning into every civilized country on the globe. As a thinker, a philosopher, a writer, he was great; but he was greatest as an apostle of the truth as he saw it—an evangelist, carrying the doctrines of justice and brotherhood to the remotest corners of the earth.' "⁴³

The New York Times summarized it best:

Profoundly tragic as is the death of Henry George at this moment, it can truly be said that his life closed in the noblest services to his ideals, fitly rounding a career that from the start has been singularly worthy Whatever we may think of the theory he worked out, no one can dispute its benevolent spirit He was the most unselfish of men. He coveted neither wealth nor the leisure so dear to the thinker. Ambition in the ordinary sense did not move him, and though he dearly loved the sympathy of his fellow-men, the usual rewards of popularity left him indifferent. His courage, moral and intellectual, was unwavering, unquestioning, prompt, and steadfast. 44

Endnotes

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 - 31. Geiger, 76.
 - 32. Life, 604-05.
 - 33. Oser, 119.
 - 34. Life, 607.
 - 35. Life, 607.
 - 36. de Mille, 232.
 - 37. Rose, 151.
 - 38. Life, 609.
 - 39. de Mille, 239.
 - 40. Post, 184-85.
 - 41. Life, 611. Emphasis in original text.
 - 42. Post, 179–80. Emphasis supplied for passage from *Progress and Poverty*.
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 - 44. de Mille, 236-37.

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