

Chapter VI

HENRY GEORGE, THE MAN AND HIS BOOKS

From the book: My Story by Tom L. Johnson

My interest in Privilege, as this record has shown, was all on the privileged side. The unwisdom of the public in making grants of the highway, or the question of municipal ownerships would have been as incomprehensible to me as the Greek alphabet. I had acquired my various special privileges by perfectly legitimate methods according to my own standards. Most of my street railway operations were based upon franchises already in existence which I had purchased from the owners. Very few of my grants had come through city ordinances passed for my benefit. I had had comparatively little contact with politics in any way. I had sometimes contributed to the campaign funds of both political parties and was therefore indifferent as to which side won. I was absolutely interested in business, in the great business opportunities before me, in the sure prospect of continuing to make money, -- and I was looking for a conductor all the time. I knew now that there were many guises in which he might appear, and my training had fitted me to recognize him in almost any of them.

When I was securely established as a business man, and at the very height of my money-making career the incident which was to change my whole outlook on the universe occurred. It came about through the intervention of a conductor too -- but not the kind I was looking for -- just a prosaic railroad train conductor running between Cleveland and Indianapolis.

I still owned my Indianapolis interests and was travelling between that city and Cleveland frequently. When on one of these trips a train boy offered me a book called Social Problems. The title led me to think it dealt with the social evil, and I said as much, adding that the subject didn't appeal to me at all. Overhearing my remarks, the conductor urged me to buy the book, saying that he was sure it would interest me, and that if it didn't he would refund the half dollar I invested in it. So I bought it, and I read it almost without stopping. Then I hastened to get all the other books which Henry George had written up to that time. I read Progress and Poverty next. It sounded true -- all of it. I didn't want to believe it though, so I took it to my lawyer in Cleveland, L. A. Russell, and said to him: "You made a free trader of me; now I want you to read this book and point out its errors to me and save me from becoming an advocate of the system of taxation it describes."

The next time I went to Johnstown I talked with Mr. Moxham about it. He said he would read it. For months it was the chief subject of conversation between these two men and myself. Mr. Moxham read it once, carefully marking all the pages where, in his opinion, the author had departed from logic and indulged in sophistry. He wasn't willing to talk much about it, however, saying that he wanted time to think it over and read it once more before he discussed it with anybody. By and by he said to me, "I've read Progress and Poverty again and I have had to erase a good many of my marks, but I don't want to talk about it yet."

And then in due course of time there came a day when he said, "Tom, I've read that book for the third time and I have rubbed out every damn mark."

Long before this I had become convinced that Mr. George had found a great truth and a practical solution for the most vexing of social problems, but Mr. Russell wasn't yet ready to admit it. Some time later he and Mr. Moxham and I were obliged to go to New York together on business, and we spent our evenings in my room at the hotel smoking and discussing Progress and Poverty. Mr. Russell's avowed intention was "to demolish this will-o'-the-wisp." Every time he stated an objection either Mr. Moxham and I would hold him up to explain exactly what he meant by such terms as land, labor, capital, wealth, etc. As fast as he correctly defined their meaning his objections vanished one by one, and that trip worked his complete conversion and was brought about by his own reasoning, and not by our arguments. The effect of all of this upon me was to make every chapter of that book almost as familiar to me as one of my own mechanical inventions.

It was in 1883 that I became interested in Mr. George's teachings -the year my family took up their residence in Cleveland, though previous to this time my wife and our two children, a son and a daughter, both of whom were born in Indianapolis, had spent some time with me at the Weddell House, where I lived when I was in the city.

I continued in my business with as much zest as ever, but my point of view was no longer that of a man whose chief object in life is to get rich. I wanted to know more about Mr. George's doctrines. I wanted to ask him questions, for I had not outgrown the why, what and wherefore habit of my childish days.

My business took me often to New York and on one of those trips in 1885 I went to call upon Mr. George at his home in Brooklyn. I was much affected by that visit. I had come to a realizing sense of the greatness of the truth that he was promulgating by the strenuous, intellectual processes which have been described, but the greatness of the man himself was something I felt when I came into his presence.

Before I was really aware of it I had told him the story of my life, and I wound up by saying: "I can't write and I can't speak, but I can make money. Can a man help who can just make money?"

He assured me that money could be used in many helpful ways to promote the cause, but said that I couldn't tell whether I could speak or write until I had tried; that it was quite probable that the same qualities which had made me successful in business would make me successful in a broader field. He evidently preferred to talk about these possibilities to dwelling on my talent for money-making. He suggested to I go into politics. This seemed quite without the range of the possible to me, and I put it aside, but said that I would go ahead and make money and devote the profits largely to helping spread his doctrines if he would let me.

One of the first things I did, and it makes me smile to recall it, was to purchase several hundred copies of Mr. George's new book, *Protection or Free Trade*, and send one to every minister and lawyer in Cleveland.

Why do converts to social ideals always select these most unlikely of all professions in the world as objects for conversion in their campaigns in behalf of new ideas?

I had not yet discovered that it is "the unlearned who are ever the first to seize and comprehend through the heart's logic the newest and most daring truths."

That first meeting with Mr. George was the beginning of a friendship which grew stronger with each passing day and which, it seemed to me, had reached the full flower of perfection when I stood at his bedside in the Union Square Hotel in New York City the night of October 28, 1897, and saw his tired eyes close in their last sleep.

Mr. George was about forty-six years old, I thirty-one, when we met and from the very first our relations were those of teacher and pupil.

My first participation in any organized activity was to attend a meeting of a voluntary committee called at the home of Dr. Henna in New York in August, 1886, to consider how our question could be made a political one. Among that little group besides Mr. George and Dr. Henna, were Father McGlynn, William McCabe, Louis F. Post and Daniel DeLeon. A short time afterwards a second meeting was held at Father McGlynn's rectory, but before we had formulated any specific plans Mr. George was called upon to become the candidate of the labor unions of New York for mayor, and so without our volition our object was accomplished. I was active in this campaign as also in the state campaign the following year, when, against his judgment, Mr. George was put forward as the United Labor Party candidate for secretary of State.

Mr. George persisted in his belief that my greatest service to the cause lay in the political field, and every time I urged my inability to speak as a reason against this, he answered that I couldn't tell because I had not tried.

And so one night early in the year 1888 I tried, the occasion being a mass meeting in Cooper Union. Of this attempt Louis F. Post generously wrote some years later, "He spoke for possibly five minutes, timidly and crudely but with evident sincerity, and probably could not have spoken ten minutes more had his life been the forfeit," but his private assurance to me was that it was without exception the worst speech he had ever heard in all his days. I am sure he has never heard anything to match it since. I know I never have.

But this unpromising beginning didn't discourage Mr. George and it made the next trial a little easier for me; and by and by I was speaking with him at various public meetings. I recall one especially large and successful one in Philadelphia.

Some five or six years later, perhaps, in a great meeting in Chickering Hall, New York, my part on the programme was to answer any questions which might be put by the audience. This was usually done by Mr. George, and though I had tried my hand at it several times before this was the first time I had attempted it when Mr. George was present. When the meeting was over we left the hall together and walked some blocks before a word was spoken. I had gotten on very well in my own estimation, but Mr. George's continued silence was raising doubts in my mind. When he did speak, he laid his hand on my arm and said, "I am ready to go now. There is someone else to answer the questions."

With Mr. George and Thomas G. Shearman of New York, I went before the Ohio legislature and advocated a change in the tax laws.

In the winter of 1895-96 a newspaper called the Recorder was started in Cleveland. At Mr. George's suggestion Louis F. Post, then of New York, came to Cleveland and went onto the paper as an editorial writer. Hoping that the Recorder might prove a truly democratic organ and thinking it might become self-supporting if it did not have too hard a struggle at the start, I, voluntarily, at first without Mr. Post's knowledge, and later, against his advice, made good the weekly deficits. First and last I contributed eighty thousand dollars to this enterprise. Regarding this purely as one of my contributions to our cause I took no evidence either of debt or ownership consideration. An effort to throw the paper against Mr. Bryan was prevented by Mr. Post. In 1897 I was pretty badly hit by the panic and had to withdraw my financial assistance with only a week's warning. Mr. Post left the Recorder at about this time and the paper was obliged to abandon the regular newspaper field, thought it continued as a kind of court calendar.

In the readjustment I was compelled to pay an additional twenty thousand dollars, the courts maintaining that I was a stockholder. I did not mind having put in the eight thousand, but I always considered the enforced payment of that additional twenty thousand a great injustice.

Subsequently Mr. Post established The Public in Chicago.

To this truly democratic weekly journal it had been my privilege to give some support.

In such ways as these I was helping Mr. George's cause and it was my ambition to become able to do all the outside work, the rough and tumble tasks, leaving him free and undisturbed in his most useful and enduring field of influence, that of writing. It was my privilege to be partly instrumental in making it possible for him to write his last book - a privilege for which I shall never cease to be profoundly grateful.

A warm friendship sprang up between my father and Mr. George and the latter built a house at Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, next to my father's and my brother Albert's and very near the summer home of my family at the same place. Together my father and Mr. George selected family burial lots adjoining each other in Greenwood Cemetery and overlooking the ocean. Here as time goes on members of our respective families are gathered to their final rest.

I was with Mr. George a great deal in the Fort Hamilton days when his home was the headquarters of the single tax movement in this country. Sometimes he went with me on bicycling excursions, and we used to laugh a good deal about one business trip he made with me. I invited him to go, telling him that I should not be very busy, that we could take our wheels and have some time to visit. It was a western trip. We stopped at a good many towns, I had interviews with several men in each place and, as was my custom, I made no discrimination between night and day when it came to settling business matters, or taking trains. To me it was rather a leisurely journey. We got in a few spins on our bicycles and of course we visited on the train. Mr. George said nothing to me about the character of the trip, but when he got home his comment to Mrs. George was, "Well, if Tom calls this trip one when he wasn't very busy, he needn't invite me to go on one when he is."

In Mr. George's last campaign for mayor of New York in 1897 I was his political manager. It was during that campaign that I was hissed in a public meeting, the first and only time in my life that that ever happened to me. I was at a meeting in Brooklyn in a large hall or an opera house. As I stepped forward to the middle of the stage to begin my speech a slight hissing came from the house, but it was overbalanced by the applause. A few moments later when I had gotten fairly started it came again, this time loud and insistent and from a group of men seared in the front and near the center of

the balcony. I stopped, looked towards them and called out, "Well, what is it? What don't you like? Tell me; maybe I can explain." No answer, but more hisses.

"Oh, you don't know what you are hissing for? You are just told to do it," I continued. "Well, come on, give us some more of it. I like it, it makes me feel good," and I coaxed for more hissing, making the sound of the tongue against the teeth used to urge a horse to greater speed. But I got no response now and the meeting was not disturbed again.

The group of hisses had evidently been sent to the meeting with instructions to break it up, but their courage failed them. When the meeting was over they followed me out and while I was waiting for the private trolley car in which I was traveling that night, a great husky workman standing near me on the sidewalk exclaimed in loud tones, "Well, did you see the big --- ---- ---- throw the con into them!"

Intending to pay me a compliment, he called me a name which Southerners and Westerners usually consider sufficient provocation for a quarrel, and my heart stood still for a moment, for my brother Albert was just behind me and I fully expected him to reach past me and hit the man who had spoken, I reached one hand behind me and got hold of my brother and put my other hand on the man's shoulder and said, "Come, my friend, help me to persuade these fellows to go with me to my next meeting," and then I invited the group of men who had tried to stop my speech to get into my car and go with me. Completely bluffed by this time they all slunk away.

When the question of Mr. George's candidacy was being discussed by some of his friends and advisers and it had been decided that he should run, someone suggested that the campaign might cost him his life. He was not yet sixty years of age, but the hard lines of his life had told upon him, and his friends knew his physical strength could hardly measure up to the demands of a heated political struggle. When the suggestion that his life might be the forfeit was made, Mr. George straightened suddenly in his chair, his eyes brightened, and with his whole heart evidently in his answer he said: "Wouldn't it be glorious to die that way!"

His body was weaker, but the same intrepid spirit was in the man as when he had made his first campaign for mayor of New York ten years before. Then when William M. Ivins had approached him on behalf of Tammany Hall and the County Democracy, offering him a seat in Congress sealed, signed and delivered if he would withdraw from the mayoralty contest Mr. George said, "If I cannot possibly be elected as you say, why do you want me to withdraw?" And to Mr. Ivins's reply, "You cannot be elected, but your running will raise hell!" Mr. George rejoined that he did not want to be elected, but he did want to raise hell. It is this, this disregard of self-interest, this indifference to one's person fate, this willingness to "raise hell" for the sake of a cause

or to give one's life for it that the world cannot understand. And it is because the world has never understood that men like Henry George in all the ages have had to pay so big a price for just the chance to serve.