

HENRY GEORGE: A CHARACTER SKETCH.

BY ARTHUR McEWEN.



MR. GEORGE AS HE IS TO-DAY.

DRIVING down Madison Avenue the other evening with Henry George, our cab passed a crowd listening to a speech from an earnest young man whose rostrum was a dray. He was one of the missionaries of the Manhattan Single-Tax Club, which for several years has been holding meetings of this kind regularly throughout New York. The mayoralty canvass is to this club but an emphasized moment of its sustained propaganda. There is hardly a city in the United States where like meetings, on the streets or in halls, do not make part of the thinking life of the community. In England, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa—wherever English is the language—these single-tax clubs exist. Their sacred writings are the books of Mr. George, which by the million have spread over the earth and find everywhere exponents who show a zeal that is less political and economic in its fundamental character than moral and religious. The first, most systematic, and greatest of his works, has been translated

into almost every living tongue, including Chinese and Japanese, and wherever it has been read the depth of the impression made is disclosed by an army of enthusiastic converts to its scheme for social regeneration and a literature of controversy, among the contributors to which, agreeing or dissenting, are the ablest men of their time.

I looked at the frail little figure in the shadow on the cab seat before me—a small, elderly man, beginning to bend under the piled years, resting limply with closed eyes—for he was very tired. To the glance of the moment there seemed no more force in him than in a weary child. One looking on him so had to know the fact in order to believe it possible that this man had stirred the world and profoundly affected its thought and bent. It is not overcounting to say that millions are convinced that he has revolutionized political economy by disproving the received theory of wages, riddling the doctrine of Malthus, and tracing the cause of the unequal distribution of wealth to the ownership by some of the resources of nature which should belong to all—that he has transformed a dismal science, approved by the fortunate and selfish as explaining and justifying their monopoly of the good things of life, into a joyful science that arms the poor with reason and logic in demanding that the fruits of their labor shall remain with them and not go unearned to others.

In the millions to whom "Progress and Poverty" is the Koran and Henry George the Prophet, are embraced more than the poor, who may naturally be expected to listen gladly to a gospel so millennial in its promises to them. My drive with Mr. George was to his headquarters from the Waldorf, where he had made a call upon one of the most intelligent, ardent, and helpful of his disciples—a millionaire. The gospel of the single-tax has its converts in every walk of life, wherever there are men of that temperament which recognizes the obligation of kinship to the weaker brother.

The single-tax orator on Madison Avenue, as a minute detail of a tremendous whole, flashed me into an emotion of admiration for the tired little man who, owing nothing to circumstance, and everything, literally everything, to his own brain, had shaken the world's conservatism and won fame.

"Doesn't it thrill you at times," I asked, nodding at the crowd and the orator. "when you think of all the fires you have kindled round the globe?"

"Yes," he said, sitting up. "This candidacy of mine for Mayor of Greater New York is a message to the men everywhere who think with me, which tells them that our cause is not receding but advancing, and that we may hope to see at least the beginning of the better time before we die."

He had mistaken my meaning. What I thought of was pride in personal achievement; what he thought of was "the cause." And that absence of the personal element, the egotism of success, is characteristic of Henry George. I do not mean, of course, that he is unconscious of the superior quality of his brains or indifferent to the satisfactions that accompany renown, for he is a man of sense, and neither feels nor affects to feel a modesty that would betoken either a want of sense or a false pretense. Henry George entirely agrees with the estimate which ranks him as a great man. I have known him long—before the world heard of him, and after, and it is a proof of his quality that fame has made him simpler. Time was when, new to conspicuousness, its clamors and pointings intoxicated a little, and he bore himself with some self-consciousness. And what wonder?

I know of no American whose career, unfavored by accident or the help of others, is so impressive. Neither schools, nor votes, nor money have contributed to make him what he is, but only his genius. His eldest son has told me of a supreme moment in his father's life when self blazed up exultant and triumphant. It was in London one morning in 1883. The night before he had addressed a great meeting in St. James' Hall. Henry Labouchere presided, and the audience was an uncommon one, many of his hearers being of the social as well as of the intellectual aristocracy and the politically eminent.

Four years before he had been earning his bread as an inspector of gas meters in San Francisco and putting his thought into "Progress and Poverty." A year before that he had been drudging as the editor of a newspaper. Yet earlier, he had followed his trade as a journeyman printer. Earlier still, he had reached California as a sailor before the mast, lived precariously on odd jobs, canvassed for subscribers for a newspaper, peddled clotheswringers—did anything to support the wife he had married on nothing at twenty-one and the family that soon came to them. He had helped as a printer to set the type of his book, cast it in electrotyped-plates, and in 1879 found a publisher in Appleton. In 1880

he came to New York on an emigrant ticket, bought with borrowed money, and suffered extreme poverty rather than return to anonymous journalism and forsake his determination to stand by his convictions and share the fate, ill or good, of his own written thoughts. His book made its way, attracting more notice abroad than here, and most of all in England, where a sixpenny edition having led to a large sale the London *Times* said it could no longer be ignored, and gave it a full-page review. Within a few hours not a copy of "Progress and Poverty" was unsold by the booksellers of London. New editions succeeded as fast as presses could print them.

When George visited England in 1883 he was far from being an obscure person, but the degree and kind of interest felt in him was not ascertainable—whether the educated in the mass viewed him with respect as a thinker of serious power and importance, or with curiosity as a mere visionary having an unusual gift of eloquence, or with fear as a disturbing madman. Those who deemed him a grander Adam Smith, those who abhorred him as a more modern Murat, and those who felt they must be where fashion led, alike thronged to St. James' Hall. He was for the hour London's lion—that much was sure.

His son tells me that his father, not seeing the boy, came alone into the room next morning and turned over the newspapers on the table. The *Times*, and all the rest, gave extended reports of the meeting and the address.

"At last," said Henry George, speaking aloud and to himself. "At last I am famous."

"And," says his son, "he went away into the next room, never noticing me, his face lighted up."

Mr. George is now in his fifty-ninth year, and those whose personal contact with him has been recent are most struck by his gentleness, and next by the abstraction of his manner. On his social side he is the least self-assertive of men now. "As a neighbor, a friend, and the head of a family," said one who is near to him, "Henry George is the justest, the most considerate, the sweetest, and most lovable of men." For some years he has been living in retirement, giving the leisure and the matured thought of his ripened life to the composition of an elaborate work on the "Science of Political Economy." It is to be his *magnum opus*. Some of the chapters I have seen, and am acquainted with the book's scheme. It shows no decline in power, but there is in it what there is in George himself—a milder tone. He had sat down in his evening to tell before night came all he thought of the world in which he found himself—to face its problems and offer his solutions. His absorption in this vast task.



MRS. HENRY GEORGE.



HENRY GEORGE.

a pleasure to him, was complete until the call to the mayoralty contest came. Then he woke up as a pasturing war-horse might at the bugle's blast, and he is the old Henry George again that I knew in San Francisco when he was in his thirties and up to his ears in his newspaper fights. But let that wait.

The Henry George of the past decade is the Henry George of New York. The diminutive figure—he is under five and a half feet and of less weight and smaller girth than many a boy of sixteen—is familiar to the people of Fort Hamilton, where he lives and has taken his walks, constitutionals without destination, and heedless in the choice of roadway or sidewalk, ambles for fresh air and thought that excluded observation of external things. The fine head, the graying-reddish beard, the blue eyes looking absently out from under the thicket of brows and through large spectacles, the soft hat set on any way—when these have appeared at the door of an editorial-room to inquire for a friend or bring an article, the stranger-journalist, unaware of the visitor's identity, has mistaken him for a colporteur, a retired schoolmaster, an unrecognized poet, or anything meek and unworldly. Mr. George's absent-mindedness is the jest of his circle. Names escape him. I heard him say to Mr. Dayton, the candidate on his ticket for Comptroller and one of the best-known men in New York: "You won't mind it, I hope, if I forget your name; I'm so conscious of the danger of getting names wrong that when the need of remembering comes it rattles me, and away the name goes."

He came late to a recent dinner at the Lotus Club, where he was to discuss with some friends

the question of his being a candidate in apprehended contingencies. It was raining, and he took from his pocket the slippers with which Mrs. George had insisted on providing him in case he should get his feet wet, and as he put them on he apologized with honest gravity:

"I lost time looking for a man I kept asking after as Kinsella, and it turned out his right name was Moriarity. At least, I think that was what he told me it was when I found him."

But there was no absent-mindedness when discussion of the business in hand ensued. Then his mind closed the door on his book and its large demands, and came to earth and the practical present, keen and wide-awake—the man of the *San Francisco Post*.

That was Henry George's own newspaper, started by him early in the seventies. It revealed the qualities of brain and character that are his essences and have made him what he is. It was an unusually good newspaper, judged by the ordinary standard. That is to say, it was active in giving the news and as eager for "scoops," and as proud of them as a newspaper not seeking to be respectable at the price of dullness can be. Mr. George drew to the *Post* the bright young newspaper men and shocked his established rivals by his enterprise, as a new paper supplied with energy and in need of business always does. But it was his editorial policy that marked the *Post* off from the usual. The editor, while setting type or writing for other newspapers, had made time in which to read and think. Much as Napoleon found in reading the monthly reports as to the state of his troops and fleets, forming twenty large volumes, "more pleasure than any young girl does in a novel," so

Henry George pursued the study of political economy. He tore himself from it because work had to be done that his family might be housed and fed and clothed.

"It amazes me," said his wife lately, fresh from reading the proofs of still another edition of "Progress and Poverty," "how the man ever found the time to do the reading and the thinking bound in that book. I'm not speaking of the intellectual ability needed to do it at all, but just the work it stands for. He was a busy man, busier than anybody I knew, in toiling for us, yet he read endlessly, and must have thought about these things with one part of his head while he used another part every day to make a living."

How thoroughly he read, as well as widely—for history, and philosophy, and the poets, and general literature claimed him concurrently with Smith and Ricardo and Mill and the French encyclopedists—and how thorough he felt his thought was before he put pen to paper on his book, I learned when "Progress and Poverty" had been before the world for some time. Herbert Spencer and Huxley and the Duke of Argyll, and many others, had dissented from its teachings and given their reasons. Mr. George has a mind above the small pride of consistency, an open mind, that is large enough to be willing to receive the truth from any quarter, whether the reception be agreeable to his preconceptions or not. He is scarcely less a contender for an opinion because it is his than was Darwin, whose gratitude was greater to one that pointed out an error than to one who accepted him as a master.

"What," I asked him, "has all this criticism done for you? Has it made you doubtful on any important point?"

"No," he said. "As yet I have seen no criticism that is not answered by the book itself."

Within the past month he remarked that he had been correcting proof on the new edition.

"Have you made any changes?" I inquired.

"A verbal one here and there," he answered,

"and a note explaining that when I wrote I was under the common error as to the identity of the principle of copyright and patents."

And the book was written nearly twenty years ago.

That, surely, is a rare, an almost unique, experience among the men who have written on the deeply serious things of life.

The germs of "Progress and Poverty" were in the *Post's* editorial columns. It was, of course, not practicable to expound in newspaper articles from day to day, to the understanding of careless readers, a theory of the cause and cure of poverty so novel, and the *Post's* incessant cry, "Tax the land!" instead of enlightening the public, got the editor the name of being a crank. Fellow journalists acknowledged his ability as a writer, but felt superior to him in sense and chaffed him condescendingly on his hobby. No set of men were more surprised by "Progress and Poverty" than the journalists. The book astonished them much more than did its success; yet he had the fate of all prophets in finding honor grudged him in his own country. The wisdom of commerce, like the wisdom of journalism, was against the *Post*. Its incredible readiness to "make a fight" merely for the reason that it was right to make it, regardless of immediate financial consequences, cost the *Post* the esteem and confidence of the business community, and brought it the respectable disapproval of the leading citizen, who is the same high-minded, courageous and judicious person in San Francisco as elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the *Post* became a power. The masses liked it for its brisk news columns and for the warmth of its sympathy with their lot.



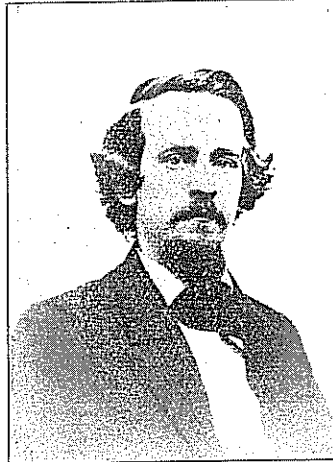
HENRY GEORGE.
(Age eighteen.)
(From a daguerreotype.)



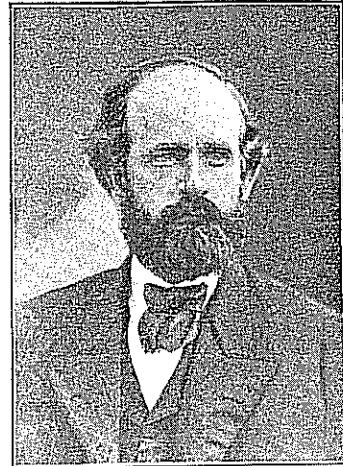
HENRY GEORGE AND HIS SISTER.
(From an old daguerreotype.)



HENRY GEORGE (AGE NINETEEN).



HENRY GEORGE (AGE TWENTY-ONE).



HENRY GEORGE (AGE THIRTY-ONE).

George, even if they were not clear about what it all meant, became popular with the workingmen. They asked him to be a candidate for the State Senate; and he was willing. At their convention, when he mounted the stage, they inquired of him, as of other candidates, if he would subscribe to the platform and be obedient to the directions of the executive committee when elected. He promptly answered that he would do neither, but remain his own master, and eloquently gave his reasons for preferring that status. He remained a private citizen, and for awhile a suspected and unpopular one. It was as foreign to George to be either a demagogue or a follower in politics as it was for the *Post* to keep subscribers and advertisers by thrifty silence. Women were appearing at local option elections soliciting votes and received disrespectful treatment. Instantly the *Post* charged upon the ungallant blackguards, and in a day had every saloon in California for its enemy. Subscribers withdrew by the thousand and advertisements were withdrawn by the column, but that made no difference to George.

The instance is typical of the course of the paper while he continued to be its owner. Whether its bravery, its brains and its honesty would have compelled support in the end must be left to opinion. Unfortunately for Henry George, as he felt poignantly at the time, but fortunately for himself and mankind, he was suddenly forced either to meet notes, which he supposed were the record of a friendly and volunteered loan, or surrender the paper. He went from the office of the *Post* poorer than when he entered it by the years of labor it had taken. Then it was that he abandoned daily journalism, took a small

place from the governor he had helped to elect, and for the first period in his laborious, strenuous and studious life knew what leisure was, or rather what it was to have time for the work he longed to do.

That long, hard, and bitter struggle in California, often humiliating, often incensing, often discouraging, but never crushing nor dishonoring, was Henry George's university. It developed and knitted his character, trained his moral muscle, and made him sufficient unto himself. For his mind the experience had an exceptional advantage, which he acknowledges in his first book. Unlike other students of social causes and effects, he was not required to ask his imagination to present him with primitive conditions and to pilot him through the mazes of higher development. In California he saw society grow from its simplest elements into the finished complexity of modern civilization. Though an actor in the drama, he was also a spectator. He lived in a laboratory as well as in the library. Hence his firm grasp on the fundamental things which so often elude able minds that have not seen them with the actual eye, but must search for them under confusing layers of institutional superimposition. Also his Californian schooling gave him that comprehension of the mind, the needs, the passions, the prejudices, the aspirations, the limitations, the possibilities, the inner soul of the common man. Not the commonplace man, but the common man, the man at the base of the structure. George was out of work with the workless, hungry with the hungry, and all the cares that press upon the common man whose daily problem is subsistence were George's own daily cares for years. The man of his political

economy, therefore, is not that machine-made monster created to make and consume wealth and operated only by the iron law of wages—the economic man—but the human man, who loves and hates and has children, and is conscious of ambitions as he works.

But while George is brother to the common man, and through sympathy carries the cross of the common man, he is his sternest mentor and never flatters him. Note these paragraphs, which give at once the starting-point of the George philosophy, an example of his gift for felicitous illustration, a touch of his crystal style, and a bit of his cruel good sense. They occur at the opening of his book on "Protection or Free Trade":

Near the window by which I write a great bull is tethered by a ring in his nose. Grazing round and round, he has wound his rope about the stake until now he stands a close prisoner, tantalized by rich grass he cannot reach, unable even to toss his head to rid himself of the flies that cluster on his shoulders. Now and again he struggles vainly, and then, after pitiful bellowsings, relapses into silent misery.

This bull, a very type of massive strength, who, because he has not wit enough to see how he might be free, suffers want in sight of plenty, and is helplessly preyed upon by weaker creatures, seems to me no unfit emblem of the working masses.

In all lands men whose toil creates abounding wealth are pinched with poverty, and, while advancing civilization opens wider vistas and awakens new desires, are held down to brutish levels by animal needs. Bitterly conscious of injustice, feeling in their inmost souls that they were made for more than so narrow a life, they, too, spasmodically struggle and cry out. But until they trace effect to cause, until they see how they are fettered and may be freed, their struggles and outcries are as vain as those of the bull. Nay, they are vainer. I shall go out and drive the bull in the way that will untwist his rope. But who shall drive men into freedom? Till they use the reason with which they have been gifted nothing can avail. For them there is no special providence. Under all forms of government the ultimate power lies with the masses. It is not kings nor aristocracies nor land-owners nor capitalists that anywhere really enslave the people. It is their own ignorance.

On the morning of the day upon which Mr. George resolved to be a candidate for Mayor of New York there was, at his request, a meeting of friends to advise him. They came to the number of thirty, and it was for its size a notably representative gathering. There were a few business men, two of them rich in lands as in other desirable things, several lawyers, some leaders in the labor unions, a few practical and more unpractical politicians, and a journalist or two. The average grade of intelligence was high.

The least impressive person present was the occasion of the assembling. Mr. George sat in the midst, his small stature and inattention to the niceties of apparel accentuated by the large and well-dressed plutocrats (but fervid single-taxers) who flanked him. The light shone on his dusty shoes and on his spectacles, through which he blinked. Advice poured upon him. There were friends who urged his health and his unfinished book as reasons why he should not run; others talked inspiring or depressing generalities; others went into figures. There was not a man there who did not at the beginning feel perfectly competent to guide Mr. George in politics and in all the things of common life. At the end there was not a man



HENRY GEORGE.

(At the time he wrote "Progress and Poverty," twenty years ago.)

there who mentally did not stand hat in hand before his superior practical sense. He talked less than anybody else, asking questions chiefly, and wound up by putting the case pro and con so simply that the matter was clear at once to everybody, and all joined in saying: "Decide it for yourself, Mr. George; and whatever your decision may be, it is ours." The rest had given their thoughts to considerations of expediency, chances of failure or success, or the effect of the canvass upon him. Henry George went straight to the core of the matter and dealt only with the question: "Is it right that I should do this? Am I needed by my cause?" In the presence of simplicity and unselfishness the wisdom of the shrewd became as foolishness

to them. There was no doubting his sincerity. When he said: "I live to advance this cause, and if it takes my health or life, and that is needed, I am ready," he said it with no flourish, but quietly, as another man might say he was ready to make some sacrifice of time and business for his party. The thirty who met divided in opinion went away as one, and that one on fire with devotion to Henry George and lifted to his plane for the hour.

Men laugh at themselves for his power over them. They go to him to advise, to expostulate, to argue, and come from him wroth with their own past littleness. For they find in him not only the capacity to think largely and clearly, but utter honesty in speaking his thought. He appals the strategists who enlist under him. He concerns himself not at all with consequences. "I have no secrets," he said to me a few days ago when talking politics; "no concealed policies. My platform is what I think, and if others do not approve my beliefs I don't ask for their votes." A man whose acquaintance with life has been so varied and intimate as his is not ignorant of how radically many of his beliefs differ from conventional opinion, of how revolutionary they seem to the conservative; but he is used to this, and utters the most frightful political heresies with a placid calmness that bewilders such followers as deem it politic not unnecessarily to offend. These followers end by imbibing his own courage and joyously trampling upon all their previously acquired maxims of policy. He is a treasure to the reporters, for he will answer any question.

"Do you believe in the Raines law?"

"No. I believe in no law in restraint of the right to do business. I would have men sell liquor and drink it as they see fit. Individual liberty is sacred."

And there is horror among the temperance people.

"What are your views on the tariff?"

"I am a free-trader—an absolute free-trader. I would do away with custom houses altogether."

And revenue-only tariff men as well as protectionists are aghast.

It all means, of course, that he would attack the evil of drink at the other end—by removing the cause in so far as it lies in poverty. And as he believes that all revenue should be derived from land there is no place for custom houses in his scheme. But he has written his explanations and will not trouble himself to repeat them at this day by word of mouth unless the interviewer makes that draft on what Mr. George has come to regard as his store of commonplaces.

It is a strange figure in the hurly-burly of



HENRY GEORGE.

(When he ran for Mayor of New York in 1883.)

politics. Incomprehensible to most, fear-inspiring to many, and ludicrous to not a few. To these last it is Colonel Newcome running for Parliament, and Don Quixote come again.

But listen to this from a politically experienced member of his campaign committee:

"How it is I don't know, but every move we have made in politics against George's advice we have been wrong, and every time we have followed his advice we have come out right. We all think we know more about the ins and outs of the game than he does, but he has a sort of instinct that guides him straight. I don't pretend to understand it."

"Perhaps," suggested another, "it's because you clever men play the political fiddle by note and he plays it by ear. Remember the vote he got in 1886 by practicing his kind of politics, which you are so modest as to think not of this world, until you wake up to the old, old fact that a man placed high can see farther than the man down below him. Isn't it just possible that a large mind can think better about anything than a smaller one can?"

Of Mr. George's ability to administer the

affairs of an important public office I am incompetent to judge, but in asking the opinion of those who are competent I learned some things bearing on the point.

The panic year of 1893 gave him an opportunity to apply in practice his financial theories, and to illustrate happily for his friends the iniquity of private ownership of land and public franchises. The proprietors of some large manufacturing in a small town were about to shut down, as money was not to be had. This would have thrown many men out of employment and lost to a proportion of them their homes, partly paid for. On the advice of Mr. George the employers deposited Government bonds, securities resting on the good faith of the Government, with a New York trust company. The latter then issued certificates against these bonds in denominations of from \$1 to \$20. The men accepted the certificates as notes for their wages, the merchants of the place took them as notes for their goods. Six \$20,000 blocks of these certificates were issued and went into circulation, the factories were kept going, nobody lost, and Mr. George claimed a triumph for fiat money.

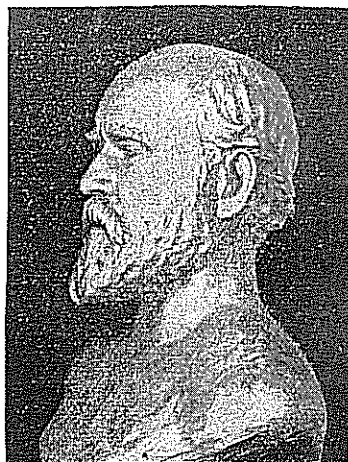
Another friend was about to erect works in a town owned principally by a single corporation. Mr. George objects to anybody pocketing the unearned increment on the value of land, but if somebody must pocket it under the present system he prefers it should be a friend rather than a stranger, whose deserts are unknown. By his suggestion, a farm three miles from the dominating corporation's town was bought, and the works erected thereon, with much land to spare. Lots began to sell, owing to the factory's location, and a trolley line was run to the town. Results: From the sale of the surplus land the farm and the factory were more than paid for, and the trolley line remains a continuously profitable property. All the increased value of that farm arising from its having been put to more gainful uses, and all the profits of the trolley, Mr. George would, if he could, divert to the public treasury; and so would his friends who pocket the same, but until a majority of their countrymen think with them, they will doubtless, with what cheerfulness they may, continue as the beneficiaries of a system they hold to be unjust.

"What is Mr. George's capacity for busi-

ness?" I asked a man of large affairs who is one of his intimates. The answer was this:

"I have consulted him repeatedly and never found his judgment unsound. When I have placed a business problem of many factors before him, he has given his mind to it with that same ability to detect the seeming and get at the real that he shows in resolving into plainness the complexities of political economy. Voltaire went to the bourse and made a fortune to prove that a man of genius was as clever as common men on their own ground, and George could have done the same, but, like Agassiz, he has had no time to make money."

Henry George is a various man, and in nearly all the aspects in which he has been revealed to me, through years of acquaintance, a superior and a good man—so superior, so large, that it appears to me a little matter whether he shall be Mayor of New York or not. That he desires election, and expects it with confidence, I am aware, but primarily his purpose in being a candidate is to direct men's minds to the social problem and his solution. He lives for that, and lives for it with an exalted enthusiasm. Yet, though he believes that he has pointed the world to a civilization that



HENRY GEORGE.

(From a bust recently made by his son.)

will be without the dark shadow of poverty, the parent of endless sin and crime and debasement and suffering—though I think he counts on a grateful posthumous fame inferior to that won by no man who has appeared among his kind, Henry George is not insensible to the dignities of the burgher. That is the side of him which spoke in London in the hearing of his unseen son, not the spirit that spoke in the cab on Madison Avenue. Doubtless as mayor he could constantly challenge the principle of laws it would be his duty to enforce, and so invite reexamination of many tenets of the received economic creed; but he is growing old, and no man may, with justice to himself, strive to do more than his strength will bear. And his book waits. To me it is strange that such a man should care for any official distinction. If he is what he believes himself to be, and if his books ultimately will do for mankind what he and those who accept their teachings believe they will do, in the time to come the fact that Henry George was or was not Mayor of New York will seem in the retrospect a thing of as small importance as that he was five feet six inches and not six feet tall.