

PROPHET OF SAN FRANCISCO

ON HIS return to New York in April, 1884, Henry George was given an official welcome a second time at Cooper Union by working men of the city.

Many Americans who had heard his speeches before he started on either of his European tours might have agreed with William Saunders, M.P.,¹ who had asked after hearing George in New York, "Why does this man, who writes so well, try to do what he cannot do at all, and what he probably never will do well—speak in public?"²

Louis F. Post had long felt "there was nothing attractive about his speeches but the message they bear."³ He now felt confirmed in his belief that the reports which had been coming from England of the eloquence of his friend were exaggerated since "there was nothing at all moving in his response to the welcome at Cooper Union." At the end of this address Post left the hall for a smoke. When he returned he discovered that George was speaking again—and with a thrilling eloquence. "It was not many minutes," says Post, "before I knew why the British press had exalted this man as 'as great an orator as Cobden or Bright.'"⁴

A few days after the Cooper Union meeting George was given a complimentary dinner at the Cosmopolitan Theater.⁵ But this banquet lacked the brilliance of the one held two years before at Delmonico's. Few men of any great prominence were present. His real adherents were being sifted out of the mass of those who had flocked to him, not because they understood his message, but merely because he was in vogue. No longer a dramatic novelty, he was disclosed as a menace to vested rights and special privilege. Those content with or fearful of altering the *status quo* were shying away from this man who

seemed bent upon making a fundamental change in the economic order.

A paid lecture at the Academy of Music proved such a financial failure that, with characteristic generosity, George offered to release the managers who had contracted with him for a tour of the United States and Canada.

The lecture tour cancelled, he set himself to writing an answer to an attack made upon him by the Duke of Argyll in the April, 1884, issue of *The Nineteenth Century*. The article written by the nobleman and scathingly called "The Prophet of San Francisco" was to become a title which Henry George wore with the greatest pride.

The Duke, who was titular chief of the great Campbell clan and whose son had married Princess Louise, fourth daughter of Queen Victoria, had served in the cabinets of Aberdeen and Palmerston and had lately resigned as Lord Privy Seal under Gladstone when he differed with the Prime Minister on the Irish land question. But what was more important, he was a man of letters and a philosopher. As author of *The Reign of Law* (1866) he had been much admired by the American whom he now attacked.

The Duke did not disapprove so much of George's theories as he disapproved of what was his own grotesque misinterpretation of those theories—he erected a scarecrow and then knocked it down. Proving his ignorance, he wrote, "In the first place, is it not a little remarkable to find one of the most extreme doctrines of communism advocated by a man who is a citizen of the United States."

Having labeled George to his satisfaction, he continued, "But like all Communists, Mr. George hates the very name of Malthus."

Although far from being a Communist, certainly George did hate the theory of Malthus: that population would overtake subsistence—a theory which the Duke evidently accepted.

Moreover, the Duke of Argyll disregarded the difference between the meanings of "ownership" and "possession." He disregarded the fact that George, who believed that land belongs in usufruct to the living, claimed that under the system of taxation he advocated, the *title* of the individual's holdings would be as inviolate as it is today. Evidently he overlooked the passage in *Progress and Poverty* which reads: "The value

of land expresses in exact and tangible form the right of the community in land held by an individual; and rent expresses the exact amount which the individual should pay to the community to satisfy the equal rights of all other members of the community. Thus, if we concede to priority of possession the undisturbed use of land, confiscating rent for the benefit of the community, we reconcile the fixity of tenure which is necessary for improvement with a full and complete recognition of the equal rights of all to the use of land."

The Duke had also overlooked a passage in *Progress and Poverty* which George had taken the trouble to underline: "Let the individuals who now hold it still retain, if they want to, possession of what they call *their* land. Let them buy and sell, and bequeath and devise it. *It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent.*"

The Duke asserted that George "is not content with urging that no more bits of unoccupied land should ever be sold, but he insists upon it that the ownership of every bit already sold shall be resumed without compensation to the settler who has bought it, who has spent upon it years of labor, and who from first to last has relied on the security of the State and the honor of the Government. There is no mere practice of corruption which has ever been alleged against the worst administrative body in any country that can be compared in corruption with the desolating dishonor of this teaching."

Page after page (there were thirty-nine) the Scotsman dedicated to his attack, really epitomizing his opinion of the "villainy advocated" by the American in his cry: "The world has never seen such a Preacher of Unrighteousness as Mr. Henry George."

George lashed back. "The Duke declares it has not been his aim to argue," he wrote. "I wish it had not been his aim to misrepresent." He restated his economic plan, and since he had travelled through much of Scotland where he had seen the crime of landed privilege and its consequent poverty, he was able to meet the Duke of Argyll on his own ground by giving proofs and citations which were irrefutable, fighting always for the rights of "the men who all life long must spend life's energies in the effort to maintain life!"

The *Nineteenth Century*, *Fortnightly*, and the *Pall-Mall Gazette* all offered their columns for George's reply. He chose the first, since it was the one that had printed the attack. His

answer was called "Reduction to Iniquity." It appeared in the July issue of the magazine.

The Scottish Land Restoration League published the two articles under the name of "The Peer and the Prophet" and spread the pamphlet throughout Great Britain. It appeared in the United States under the title of "Property in Land."⁶

After this controversy, George turned again to his book on the tariff. Installing himself with his family on the Long Island farm belonging to young Walter Cranford, son of John P. Cranford, a devoted adherent, he focused his attention to the re-writing of *Protection or Free Trade*, the first manuscript of which had been lost. "I find it will be just as hard to do as though I had never attempted it," he wrote to Thomas F. Walker.⁷ From his study window he used to watch the stupid bull who periodically got himself tangled in the tether rope—which is described in the opening paragraphs of the book.

This work demanded great concentration. But there were periods of relaxation, as for instance when the Thomas Georges came to visit.

Henry loved to tease his beautiful, black-eyed sister-in-law, Susan. The two shared a fondness for ice cream. And while agreed that Philadelphia ice cream was the best in the world, they indulged in a running argument as to where one could buy the biggest portion for ten cents—in Philadelphia or New York. George argued for New York. She insisted that the helpings were larger in Philadelphia. One afternoon they drove to Jamaica in the Cranford surrey, and after Henry had left his sister-in-law at a store where she wished to shop, he drove to the confectioner's where they had planned to meet. He ordered three portions of ice cream—two on one plate which he left for Susan. He began eating the single portion, and when she came in her brother-in-law explained that he had started on his ice cream because the weather was hot and the stuff was melting. Her gaze fell on the huge mound of ice cream at her place. She flashed her radiant smile, and then her face clouded. "Oh, Henry!" she exclaimed. "I guess you win after all. You do get bigger portions over here than we do in Philadelphia!" She had forgotten to look for the little telltale crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

Work on the tariff book was interrupted, first by a speaking invitation from the Ninth Congress of the Episcopal Church,

which met in Detroit. George attended and spoke on the subject, "Is Our Civilization Just to the Working Man?" Soon after that came another call to Great Britain from the Scottish Land Restoration League.

Henry George made his third trip abroad in the autumn of 1884, this time traveling alone. His first speaking engagement was in familiar St. James's Hall in London. The speech drew a tremendous crowd. Helen Taylor, Michael Davitt, and William Forsythe, president of the Scottish League, appeared with him and made brief addresses. The meeting caused so much comment in the press that wherever George spoke on his two-month tour meeting halls were crowded. His Glasgow address, a pay affair, drew such an audience that many persons had to be turned away.⁸

His brief tour, with speeches in rapid succession, ended as it had begun—in London. Denied the use of the Guildhall by the Lord Mayor, the English League conducted the meeting outdoors.⁹ Some seven thousand persons, mostly unemployed, attended. Two extra meetings—one in Liverpool and the other in Belfast and both enthusiastic—were rung in before George sailed for home.

This third visit to Great Britain was as stimulating as the two earlier ones. The crowds were large and the press was most attentive. Men in high places were taking his ideas much more seriously. "A book has happened," wrote James L. Garvin, "Henry George appeared and like a few since Thomas Paine he awakened new imaginings and aspirations amongst Radical working men; they thought they saw a great light. Amongst them that passionate and ingenuous work *Progress and Poverty* went like wildfire. Chamberlain read it, electrified: the effect on Morley was the same."¹⁰

The most encouraging sign of all, however, was a report made by the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes,¹¹ whose members included the Prince of Wales, Cardinal Manning, and Lord Salisbury. The Commission recommended that a tax of 4 per cent of the selling price be placed upon vacant or inadequately used land. This would discourage the existing speculation in land holdings and encourage the freeing of building sites. Unfortunately, however, the attempt of the Royal Commission to discourage speculation in land was quashed by its Tory members.

On this trip, too, George made the acquaintance of James

Bryce, historian and author of *The American Commonwealth*. The two men had a long talk. George came away much impressed.

He had planned, on his return to the United States,¹² to resume lecturing. But the times seemed unfavorable. So George kept the pot boiling by writing articles for the *North American Review*, the while concentrating on his manuscript of *Protection or Free Trade*. Work on this powerful appeal for freedom in production as well as for freedom in exchange had been interrupted several times, notably when he had lost more than a hundred pages of the first draft. George worked diligently. In the fall and winter of 1885 some of the chapters appeared serially in seven newspapers.¹³ The \$3,000 received for this more than paid for publication of the book.

This was done by the author himself under the firm name of Henry George & Co., which became the sole American publishers of the cloth editions of the George books.¹⁴ His son Richard was associated with him in this enterprise and was jokingly known by friends as "Co."

One day late in 1885, while George was busy with the publication of *Protection or Free Trade*, a stranger—a Kentuckian—called upon him. He was Tom Lofton Johnson. Thirty-one years old, of average height but so heavy as to be termed "fat," his face was so beautiful and his smile so beguiling that it charmed even his enemies. He looked like an adult cherub.

At the age of fifteen Tom Johnson had started to retrieve his family fortune, which had been lost in the Civil War, by selling newspapers. Later he became a street car conductor, made some small but lucrative inventions, and gradually achieved wealth through more inventions, the acquisition of street railway franchises, and the manufacture of steel rails.

Once, when Johnson was traveling between Indianapolis and Cleveland, his home town, a train "butcher" recommended that he read *Social Problems*. The youthful industrialist turned it down with the remark that he was "fed up on sex stuff." The conductor overheard the conversation and urged him to buy, explaining that it wasn't "sex stuff" and offering to refund the half dollar if the book proved uninteresting. So Johnson read. And soon after he was reading *Progress and Poverty*. Its arguments converted him, though it seemed against his interest to be converted. He took the book to his lawyer, L. A. Russell.

"I want you to read it," he said, "and point out its errors to me and save me from becoming an advocate of the system of taxation it describes."

Although the lawyer was paid to criticize the book, he failed to convince his client of its fallacies. Whereupon Johnson gave a copy to his partner, Arthur J. Moxham, president of the Johnson Steel Manufacturing Company of Johnstown, Pa., who read it, "carefully marking all the places where, in his opinion, the author had departed from logic and indulged in sophistry."

Moxham read it a second time and erased some of the marks. He went through it again, and then reported, "Tom, I've read that book for the third time and I've rubbed out every damn mark."

The two partners then went to work on Russell. Whether they converted him to the philosophy of Henry George matters less than the fact that their discussion clarified and strengthened their own understanding of *Progress and Poverty*. Johnson's opinion thus reinforced, he mustered courage to call on the author. George at once put him at his ease, placing him in a comfortable chair, while he himself stretched out on his lounge close by and smoked.

Johnson relates:

I was much affected by that visit. I had come to a realizing sense of the greatness of the truth that he [George] was promulgating by the strenuous, intellectual processes which have been described, but the greatness of the man 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 he said 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.

Johnson became so interested in the new book *Protection or Free Trade* that he ordered two hundred copies to be sent to lawyers and ministers in Cleveland.

His publishing venture well launched, George worked on the

preparation of a series of articles on "Labor in Pennsylvania" for the *North American Review*.¹⁵ He wrote to Taylor, "The Primer is something I have intended to write for a long time—ever since I wrote *Progress and Poverty*, but have not done so for want of time. I had intended to write it this summer but it is very doubtful whether I will be able to do so."¹⁶

Instead, he made plans to start a weekly paper. But an interruption came which caused a complete change in his plans—indeed, in his life.