

CHARACTER TRAITS

IF IT HAS been given me to help forward a great movement, Henry George once said, "it is through no merit of mine. . . . It is from the simple fact that, seeing a great truth I swore to follow it. . . . If I were to take to myself such flattering things as have been said to me tonight my usefulness would soon be ended."¹

This little testament of modesty, so typical of George, was delivered at a place and time—in Sydney during the Australian tour—when his popularity was high and the adulation of crowds knew no bounds.

His modesty was the result of a conscious discipline that he might not become the victim of ambition. To Frances M. Milne he wrote, "Praise is the deadliest poison that can be offered to the human soul, and were I ever to accept it, my power would soon be gone. What power I have comes from the fact that I know my own weakness; and when duty lay on me have neither feared blame nor sought praise."²

Once, while walking with a friend, George dropped into a postoffice where he noticed a man struggling to fill out a money order. George offered to help him, and did. "It is not every day that such a man can have a philosopher to write for him," observed George's companion as their stroll was resumed. "A philosopher," was the reply, "is no better than a bootblack. Such terms are only relative to our own small affairs."³

When speaking of the Single Tax movement he avoided the use of the first person singular. This was not through any affectation of humility but because it was never to him a "George movement." He would refer to "our cause" or "our work." He even disliked to expound his philosophy to one person, for he felt that this was imposing his personality on another. A reporter came to him once and requested, "Mr.

George, I want you to tell me all about the Single Tax." The economist took twenty cents out of his pocket and handed the money to the surprised young man. "I've told all about it in a book; buy it—paper edition," he said, and walked away.⁴

One time a friend at the Reform Club took him to task for allowing another member apparently to down him in an argument concerning his own economic doctrines. "Let him have that pleasure," said George, evidently remembering the Biblical admonition to "suffer fools gladly," and crept away from the discussion.⁵

But there was no false modesty about him. He held in later life the same attitude he had taken when *Progress and Poverty* was first published. He had said then, in answering the Sacramento *Record Union's* criticism of the book, "If I shall seem to show any of that absence of diffidence which you deem one of the remarkable characteristics of my book, do not charge it to any want of respect or lack of proper modesty, but to the fact that when a man has so thought out and tested his opinions that they have in his mind the highest certainty, it would be but affectation for him to assume doubts that he does not feel."⁶

At one of the Sunday "at homes" a young professor⁷ who was teaching his youngest daughter, Anna, at the time, explained to the author that he had not yet had time to read George's last book. "Do so, when you can," was the reply, "you will find it worth while." Next morning Anna went to her teacher apologetically. "You must think that my father is awfully conceited," she said, "but he really isn't." The man smiled. "I know what he meant," he said.

But it was not until later that the daughter understood her father in terms of the Orient: "He who knows and knows that he knows, is a wise man. Follow him!"

Nervous and high-strung, Henry George was a man of infinite patience when it came to working out tedious problems, carefully explaining to a typist any difficulties in his own manuscript and taking pains to help his children with their lessons or answer their questions. But he was impatient when he called his children to him. Then he wanted immediate response and strict obedience. If they did not hear his first summons he would raise the commanding tone in his voice. This seemed a strange contradiction in one who was ever ready to give them his time. This trace of impatience did not, however, make them fear

him.* In all else he treated them as though they were adults—or at least let them think that he did, with no appearance of superiority. He never pressed his own opinions on them but gave them free choice in all things that were possible. And if all four of them came to accept his economic theories, it was by a process of reasoning which any stranger might have adopted—not because their father had “taught” them.

Politically always, though fearless, Henry George tried to concede in small matters that did not count in order to win big issues which did. Believing that “the function of the politician is to minimize resistance,” he tried to bow to social usage where to do so disarmed antagonism.⁸ For instance, whenever he was in doubt as to the requirements of dressing for an evening affair, he always wore full dress. Probably because he disliked the clothes he made a special effort when he put them on and so usually looked well groomed. Once, however, he was discovered toward the end of one formal reception to have been wearing his dress studs back to front—three gold screws sprouting out of his white starched bosom. His shoes were always more or less of a gamble.

“Maybe Mrs. George didn’t look after him like his mother!” related Carney. “Once when she went to Philadelphia she put me in charge of his clothes and maybe I didn’t have to be sharp to keep him from goin’ out wearin’ shoes that weren’t mates! And when I caught him, he laughed, ‘Shure, they’ll carry me just as far,’ sez he. ‘Oh, but Mr. George,’ sez I, ‘Herself wouldn’t like it!’ ‘Tis right ye are, Carney,’ sez he. And with that he changed his boots, docile-like. But I just had to give up about his cuff links matchin’. Wasn’t he the pleasant man—just!”

Cuff links gave the economist little worry but on occasion cuffs did. Before making a speech he always seemed nervous, though once launched into his subject his self-consciousness vanished. Sometimes he would pace the platform and sometimes he would pound the desk before him with his fist to emphasize a point. This last vehement gesture had a way of dislodging a cuff which in those days was made separate from the shirt. Unconsciously he would remove it. If the second cuff offended, off would come that one, too, and be laid beside its mate on stand or chair. From then on till the end of the speech Mrs.

* Yet one of them, my mother, clearly lived in awe of him. He never spoke to her alone that she did not tremble a little, and if he addressed her directly by her given name “Anna” instead of the pet “Babe” or “Petty,” tears filled her eyes.—Agnes de Mille

George was usually in a state bordering on consternation. However, he always stopped at the cuffs.

Scrupulous as to cleanliness, for the most part he was oblivious to his dress. His small, shapely, pink-palmed hands were frequently ink-stained, his clothes carelessly worn. He had an absent-minded way of letting his cigar ash fall down his coat—to the despair of family and friends. It was generally agreed that he wore the most disreputable hat in New York. Of course, it was always a neat hat when it started; Mrs. George saw to that. But by process of exchange it usually deteriorated, for he was not a good “trader,” invariably picking up the wrong hat, the shabbier the better.

One day Bolton Hall, a prominent figure in the New York Tax Reform League, had a brief talk with the younger daughter of the house to the effect that while he and she loved and understood her father, strangers might get an unfavorable impression of him, and didn't she think she could occasionally brush his clothes and keep them a bit tidier, etc., etc.?

After the street door had closed on the caller, the girl obediently seized a whisk broom from the hall table and went to work on her father's fedora. She brushed and patted and poked it until it again resembled a hat. She had hung it carefully on the rack when the owner ran, whistling, down the stairs. Dutifully, she began to wield the brush about his shoulder.

“Don't stop me, I'm in a rush,” he said, and kissed her good-by. He grabbed his hat by the soft crown, squashed the wrecked thing on his head—backwards—and just as the ash from his cigar cascaded down his coat, dashed off!

Henry George took his speaking seriously. He was a cheery man with a ready laugh, but he cautioned Louis F. Post, who was an extraordinarily fine raconteur, to tell fewer funny stories in his speeches lest his audiences take him as a humorist and not heed his real message. George feared Post would have to pay the penalty Mark Twain suffered. (Possibly he remembered an afternoon when he returned home so dejected that Mrs. George had thought he was ill. “No, I'm not ill,” he had replied to her anxious question, “I'm just blue. I've just come from two hours with Sam Clemens.”) He explained to Post that Mark Twain, having established himself as a funny man, was now almost heartbroken because he could not get the public to take him seriously.

George usually wore an air of high optimism. But there were

times when his spirits were low. Years earlier he had written Dr. Taylor, "It does not surprise me that you feel that desponding mood sometimes, for I so often feel it myself. And I presume that is the case with every man who really amounts to anything. What we do is *so* little as compared with what we feel we could do, and ought to have done."⁹

In *Progress and Poverty* he had written: "The bitterest thought—and it sometimes comes to the best and the bravest—is that of the hopelessness of the effort, the futility of the sacrifice. To how few of those who sow the seed is it given to see it grow, or even the certainty to know that it will grow."¹⁰

Frank Stephens recalled having gone to visit George one afternoon before a meeting. The host did not rise to greet his guest, as was his custom, but remained stretched out on his couch, wearing an expression that moved Stephens to ask, "Stage fright?"

"No," replied George slowly, "worse than that! I was wondering if it was all worth while!"¹¹

Perhaps at that moment he was conscious of what Tom Johnson later observed, "Men like Henry George in all ages have had to pay so big a price for just the chance to serve."¹²

The unevenness of George's public speaking has been mentioned before. He was not uniformly eloquent. His speeches were inspirational and depended much upon the temper and type of his audience. He was always grieved if he felt his effort had fallen below par. One day, after he had delivered what he considered a poor address, he said to Charles Frederick Adams, who was a member of the Single Tax League of Washington, D.C., "Come to lunch, Charley. I am so ashamed of that lecture as an artistic performance that I want to spend the money I got for it."¹³

Usually amiable and patient under heckling, he could on other occasions be terse and sharp. When, for instance, someone wrote him "for the purpose of deciding a wager" and asked, "Can a man be a Single Taxer and not believe in free trade?" he replied, "I do not know that I am called upon to decide wagers. I have not hid my own opinion."

Though hardly a wit, he had a robust sense of humor which led him into retorts that were so apropos as to be extremely amusing. After most of his speeches he invited questions. Once, at a meeting in Texas, he was asked, "Suppose for argument's sake, Mr. George, that you owned all the land and I owned all

the capital. What in that case would you say?" His answer came back like a shot, "Move!"

The same question was often asked in different forms and was as differently answered. When someone inquired if industrial slavery was caused by "the aggregation of capital," George replied, "You can aggregate capital as much as you please, as long as you leave to labor the raw material."

And again, this time at a great meeting at Lambeth Baths, to the question, "What about capital?" he replied quickly, "When you've got the cow you've got the milk!"

On another occasion he was asked, "How do you explain the Savior's declaration that 'The poor ye have always with you?'"

"Because," answered George, "He was talking to the scribes and Pharisees and hypocrites!"

A gentleman in England, pained at the thought of surrendering his unearned increment, complained, "But this land has been in my family for seven hundred years!"

"Well, don't you think it has been in your family long enough?" asked George mildly.

A clergyman in Scotland, who apparently was of the same mind as his English neighbor, announced, "We read in Holy Writ that Jacob owned land. If it is right for Jacob it is right for me!"

"We read in Holy Writ," replied George, "that Solomon had five hundred wives and one thousand concubines, but I do not consider it right for me."

At an Anti-Poverty Society meeting the question was raised, "How does Mr. George propose to ascertain the value of the unearned increment?"

"I propose," George answered, "to get at the value of land by boards of assessors." His eyes began to twinkle. "A sign could be placed on every lot, saying, 'This lot measures so much, and it is assessed at so much.' If that assessment is too high, the man upon whom it was made will let you know. If it is too little, the neighbors around who are assessed higher will let you know."

While he rarely used notes when he made a speech, he usually retired to his couch beforehand, where, smoking slowly, he thought through what he had to tell his audience.

Much of the formative work on his writing was done in the same manner. A knotty problem solved, he would jump up and write the answer at his desk in longhand or type it in a code form—using single letters or punctuation marks to represent

words. This would be expanded later, perhaps by his secretary—if he happened to have one at the time.

His method of work was particularly baffling to William T. Croasdale, who as managing editor of *The Standard* was always conscious of having to meet deadlines and who had a weekly tussle with the procrastinating editor to get his copy in on time. Frequently George would consult office boys or repair men, or whoever happened to be handy, about the structure of a sentence. This exasperated Croasdale but Louis F. Post understood it perfectly. "It was no idle habit though it seemed so to some of us," he wrote (in *The Prophet of San Francisco*.) "The reason that Henry George gave for it was that English should be written so as to be understood by even the least literate reader."

His rules for expression were few—"Make short sentences, avoid adjectives, use small words." But in spite of his effort to simplify his writing, he was aware that his books could not always be assimilated at first reading. To Josephine Shaw Lowell he wrote, "I ask you to read *Progress and Poverty* again. With the exception of your father and perhaps a few others, I have never known anyone who got the argument clearly in one reading. I do not think the fault is in the book—it arises from its scope and the necessary connection between the links of a logical chain."¹⁴

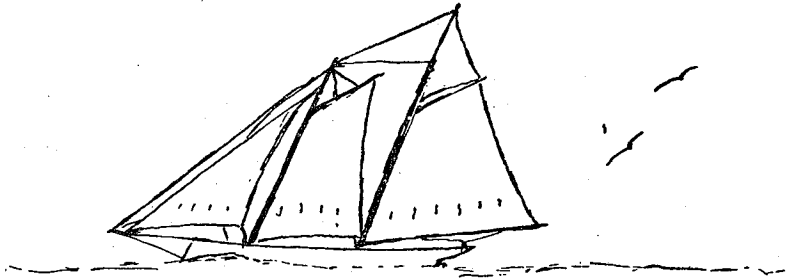
He was a prodigious reader, devouring works of history, biography, and poetry. He possessed that enviable gift of being able to quote on demand a useful phrase out of the storehouse of his memory. It was the dramatic rather than the lyric quality which he loved best in poetry. He wrote to Dr. Taylor when his friend sent George some of his verses, "It is good, but why, when the great struggle is on and history is being made, will you go off into the woods and play the flute? I should rather see you put your lips to the trumpet!"¹⁵

He found it difficult to approve "a piece of art without high purpose."¹⁶ In 1881 he had written Francis George Shaw, "I have been reading again the extract you gave me from *The Light of Asia*. It rings in my memory like sweet music." A few weeks later he wrote, "I send you Arnold's translation of the *Gita Govinda*, which you tell me you had not seen. It is a little the worse for wear for I have read it over and over."¹⁷

Early he taught his children Leigh Hunt's "Abou Ben Adhem" and Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic." If asked

to read aloud he usually turned to Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Abt Vogler," "Saul," or to the Bible.

"Maybe Mr. George didn't know the Bible—every wurd of it," said Carney. "Sundays when I'd come home from Mass he'd say: 'An' what was the text today, Carney?' An' as sure as I'd start to tell it, an' maybe fumble in the tellin', he'd finish it. An' me only after havin' just heard it, too! An' do you know, I got the habit of goin' up front in Church where I could hear what the priest said—just so Mr. George couldn't catch me on the text!"



This little boat, for my little girl,

New York, July 19, 1886

A drawing by Henry George for his eight-year-old daughter, Anna.