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TOM JOHNSON'S STORY¹

My Story. By Tom L. Johnson. Edited by Elizabeth J. Hauser. B. W. Huebsch, New York.

THIS is an exceedingly interesting human document. Mr. Johnson died at the age of fifty-seven, in the spring of 1911. He was a self-made capitalist, born in the South, the son of a Confederate soldier, making his first entry into business as a newsboy, and acquiring a large fortune at a comparatively early age as a builder and operator of street railways. He was a forcible man of business and had in a marked degree those qualities of human sympathy and human understanding that enabled him to get on well both with his workmen and with fellow-capitalists, like the late Mark Hanna, for example, with whom he was sometimes at war. When he was twenty-nine years of age, and at that time a rich and successful capitalist, he came into contact with Henry George, the founder of the Single-Tax movement, in a singular way:

I still owned my Indianapolis interests and was traveling between that city and Cleveland frequently. When on one of these trips a trainboy 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.

Mr. Johnson then went to his lawyer, whom he always consulted about his business enterprises, and asked him to read "Progress and Poverty," and give him (Johnson) the arguments which would demolish it. This, although he read the book, the lawyer was unable to do. Then he asked one of his partners to help him demolish it. The partner read the volume, discussed it, and argued about it with Mr. Johnson, and finally himself became converted. From that time on Mr. Johnson was an ardent Single-Taxer; he made the personal acquaintance of Henry George, who persuaded him to take up public speaking and to go into politics, although up to that time Mr. Johnson had never even voted. He became a Democratic Member of Congress, and eventually Mayor of Cleveland. The story of his extraordinary conflict with special interests in that city is familiar to all American newspaper readers.

However one may differ with Mr. Johnson's political philosophy, and however much

one may criticise some of his methods, no man who loves courage and self-sacrifice can help admiring these qualities as they were displayed in a very remarkable degree in Mr. Johnson's personality and career. His slogan was, "Destroy special privilege." That he believed in the "plain people," to use Abraham Lincoln's phrase, is clear from his record in the disaster of the Johnstown flood. In the remarkable work of recreating that devastated community he was a heroic figure.

One of the interesting incidents of this Johnstown experience was the free operation of the street railways. Mr. Johnson and his partners ran the street cars for two or three months after the disaster without collecting fares, because so many of the inhabitants were without money. People rode as freely as they ride in the elevators of business buildings. Mr. Johnson, as a result of his experiment, afterwards seriously advocated free municipal street railways, to be supported by general taxation.

It is easy to criticise this big-hearted radical—in some respects it is just to criticise him. In our judgment, he was mistaken in assuming, as he seemed to do, that "special privilege" is entrenched behind a sharply defined line—that all men on one side of it are exploiters and robbers of the people, and that all men on the other side are noble martyrs in a just cause. The fact is that special privilege or special interests are based in human selfishness, and that selfishness is an attribute of every individual, against which he must struggle quite as much when he finds it in himself as when he finds it in others.

Mr. Johnson once said to President Roosevelt: "The difference between you and me, Mr. President, is this: You are after lawbreakers, I am after the lawmakers." In this epigram, we think, may be found Mr. Johnson's most serious defect. He seemed to believe that making good laws is equivalent to making good citizens. The man who pursues this philosophy is in danger of putting the cart before the horse. The first thing to make is good citizens, who themselves will make good laws. Laws against special interests, special privilege, grafting, bribery, and all the rest of it, are essential, but they are as nothing unless there is a vigorous and persistent public opinion to enforce them.

The present volume is a first-rate human story, as interesting as a novel. We recommend it, not because we recommend all of Mr. Johnson's methods, but because in a perfectly frank and good-tempered spirit it reveals the fact, which can hardly be denied, that in their conduct of their private as well as of their public business the American people—not merely capitalists, but professional men, ministers, village

merchants, and political officials—have lived in all their political relations for many years on the basis of special privilege. The term of years of which this allegation may be made extends from the period of sudden industrial and railway development just preceding the Civil War until the period when figures like Mr. Johnson, Mr. George, and Mr. Bryan appeared in the Democratic party, and Mr. La Follette and Mr. Roosevelt in the Republican party. Of the movement against special privilege Mr. Roosevelt became the pre-eminent National figure. No one can read with an open mind Mr. Johnson's reminiscences, Mr. La Follette's autobiography now appearing in the "American Magazine," or such a modest little book as the recently published life of John M. Forbes, "An American Railroad Builder," by Henry Greenleaf Pearson, and fail to be convinced that the political and social abuses of special privilege have been very real, and that there has been real need of National leadership against them.