CHAPTER X

THE BRITISH LECTURE TOURS

BACK in New York, George had no choice but to resume his hack journalism and paid lecturing. He felt acutely the precariousness of his financial position.

" How blessed are those," he wrote to a friend, " for whom the pot boils of itself ! I have now just 25 dollars in the world, about half a week's living with economy ; no, not that. However, this is no new experience to me."

The family continued its restless, comfortless existence; forever on the move ; now boarding in rooms, now living in a furnished house ; always enveloped in a dreary atmosphere of genteel poverty. Yet straitened means introduced no bitterness into the domestic circle. On the morning of his wife's birthday George left a note for her to read when she awoke :

" To me the mature woman is handsomer and more lovable than the slip of a girl whom twenty-three years ago I met without knowing that my life was to be bound up with hers. We are not rich—so poor just now, in fact, that all I can give you on this anniversary is a little love letter ; but there is no one we can afford to envy and in each other's love we have what no wealth could compensate for."

An unexpected legacy helped to relieve the financial pressure. Francis Shaw died and left George a thousand dollars. He resolved to take the opportunity to write another book. As his subject he chose the tariff problem, but when he had written about a hundred pages the manuscript mysteriously disappeared—into the ash-barrel, George suspected. He had not the courage to sit down at once and rewrite what

he had lost, so that it was several years before his book on the tariff appeared. However, he managed to get some of his journalistic work into book form. A series of articles which he wrote for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* were reprinted in a volume with the title *Social Problems*. This is one of the most freshly written of George's books, and forms perhaps the easiest introduction to his general theory. But its chief significance is the extent to which it departs from the principles of *Progress and Poverty*. George now admits that all the surplus wealth of society does not go to the landowners. Part of the loot is intercepted by industrial capitalists, though their share is smaller. The single tax, therefore, is not the universal panacea which he had proclaimed it to be.

" Let me not be misunderstood," wrote George. " I do not say that in the recognition of the equal and unalienable right of each human being to the natural elements from which life must be supported and wants satisfied, lies the solution of all social problems. I fully recognize the fact that even after we do this, much will remain to do. We might recognize the equal right to land, and yet tyranny and spoliation be continued." [1]

" Let me not be misunderstood." This is rather cool. To whom was the misunderstanding due if not to George himself? Had he not written in *Progress and Poverty*:

" What I, therefore, propose as the simple yet sovereign remedy, which will raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, extirpate pauperism, abolish poverty, give remunerative employment to whoever wishes it, afford free scope to human powers, lessen crime, elevate morals, and taste and intelligence, purify government and carry civilization to yet nobler heights, is—*to appropriate rent by taxation*." [2]

And yet now it appears that tyranny and spoliation will continue, after the equal right to land is recognized.

Clearly, George's thought had developed, perhaps unrealized by himself. Possibly the study of American industrialism which he had made while writing *Social Problems* had thrown a new light on the activities of in-

[1] *Social Problems*, p. 264. [2] *Progress and Poverty*, p. 288.

dustrial capitalists and convinced him that they were not the blameless persons he had represented them to be in *Progress and Poverty*. Perhaps the criticisms of Hyndman and other socialists had sunk deeper into his mind than he was aware of. Hyndman, in his autobiography, claims credit for having induced George to write *Social Problems*, a book which " showed that he was beginning to understand that in our complicated society, man cannot live by land alone." [1] Whatever the explanation, George had published a contradiction of the main contention of his earlier work, and left the contradiction unresolved. It would have been to his eternal honour if he had gone back and restated his theory in the light of the fresh idea that had come to him. But few middle-aged thinkers care to retrace their steps. George, perhaps, felt he had no choice but to go on. The charm of his scheme was its simplicity. If he introduced qualifications and reservations he would destroy its appeal. Like theologians in a similar dilemma, he preferred to practice a certain economy in his exposition of the truth. His position is understandable, but our admiration for his honesty as a thinker would certainly have been greater if he had acted differently.

Towards the end of 1883 George received an invitation to make a lecture tour in Great Britain. The invitation came from the English Land Union, an offshoot of the Land Nationalization Society, formed by supporters of the Georgean idea. A fund was to be raised to meet the lecturer's expenses. George decided to accept, and on the last day of the year he landed at Liverpool, accompanied by his elder son.

His arrival in England was well timed. The cheap edition of *Progress and Poverty* was selling like wildfire, and converts were rallying in thousands to the new doctrine. Most of them came from the radical wing of the Liberal party. Liberalism in the eighties was passing through a difficult time. The political reforms which liberals advocated had nearly all been accomplished, and yet the social condition of England left much to be desired. Poverty, slums, unemployment, and all the other black fruits of industrialism

[1] Hyndman, *Record of an Adventurous Life*, p. 291.

flourished ranker than ever. Economic liberalism had proved barren, and strident voices were demanding that it should make way for some new political faith. Socialism was born, and honest radicals felt uneasy with regard to it. It contradicted their belief in liberty and *laissez-faire* but yet it offered a solution of the social problem, whereas economic liberalism had none. To men in this dilemma, *Progress and Poverty* came as a godsend. It proposed a cure for poverty which involved the absolute minimum of state interference, and allowed radicals to retain their belief in the blessings of individualism. And it aimed a blow at the landed interest, with which radicals had been at war since the days of the Corn Laws. Everything fitted in perfectly. When George came to England he found thousands of sturdy radicals ready to acclaim him as a deliverer.

George's first lecture was delivered in St. James's Hall to a large audience representative of all social classes. Michael Davitt was on the platform, and Henry Labouchere, Radical M.P. and editor of *Truth*, occupied the chair. At this time George's oratorical powers were perhaps at their best. He spoke slowly and deliberately, sometimes pacing up and down the platform, sometimes leaning over the table with one hand in his pocket. His pauses were long, and often he appeared to have broken down, but always his sentences wound triumphantly to their close. His hearers were never bored. He did not treat them to too much political economy. His speeches were lively expositions of a few simple principles easily grasped. Flashes of humour enlivened his discourses, and appeals to sentiment gave his audience the opportunity to cheer. There were frequent references to "the Creator" and "the All-Father." Unfriendly critics said that George believed himself one of the Almighty's particular confidants. But the religious note in his addresses was not uncongenial to Victorian audiences. And then he proclaimed such golden visions! He told his St. James's Hall meeting that the single tax would bring in £300,000,000 a year, and would provide every widow with a pension, every girl with a dowry, and every boy with a start in life. When the great audience heard this they sprang to their feet and cheered

deliriously. Men jumped on the seats and waved their hats.

Next morning the *Times* discharged a fusillade of criticism at the lecturer, and the *Standard* described him sarcastically as " a man with a mission ; born to set right in a single generation the errors of six thousand years." But the interest of the public was aroused, and for the next three months George was the most talked-of man in the kingdom. To his wife he wrote :

" I can't begin to send you the papers in which I am discussed, attacked and commented, for I would have to send all the English, Scottish, and Irish press. I am getting advertised to my heart's content, and I shall have crowds wherever I go."

In wintry weather George set out on his provincial tour. He lectured at Plymouth, Cardiff, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bolton, and Newcastle. Criticism followed him wherever he went. John Bright, now in George's opinion " at the end of his tether," referred indignantly to the monstrous proposals " imported lately by an American inventor." Frederic Harrison, leader of the English Positivists, called him " the wild man from California," and accused him of talking the jargon of Californian bandits and mail-robbers. W. H. Mallock, brilliant author of *The New Republic*, wrote an incisive criticism of *Progress and Poverty* in the *Quarterly Review*, and the Liberty and Property Defence League circulated a pamphlet against it—the work of that tough old judge and unrepentant individualist Lord Bramwell. George had the sensation of being an Ishmaelite. Every man's hand was against him. At Birmingham he complained humorously :

" The Tory party of course abuse me ; the Liberal party are afraid of me ; the Church party say I am antagonistic to every form of religion, and even Mr. Bradlaugh is going to pulverize me. The Irish party have warned their leaders against attending any of my meetings, and the Socialists are down on me."

It was not only with his avowed opponents that George had to contend. He had trouble with his own friends. The

general body of his supporters included a right and a left wing, and it was difficult to satisfy both. On the one hand there were single taxers who were either already socialists or on the point of becoming socialists. They wanted George to support the nationalization of capital as well as of land. This he refused to do. Capital was the creation of labour, he argued. It hurt nobody, and the capitalist was a harmless person, provided he did not enjoy a monopoly. But George never squarely faced the question whether the possession of capital did not by itself confer a monopoly, though he had come very near admitting this in *Social Problems*.[1]

With the conservative section of his supporters, the trouble was compensation. They wished him to buy out the landlords. This, logically, George could not agree to. If his theory was true, the landlords absorbed all the surplus wealth of society. To give them compensation would simply perpetuate the existing state of affairs. But, he was asked, why should a man with £100 lose it if he invested it in land and keep it if he invested it in shares? George replied that landowning was immoral, like slave-owning, and in America slavery was abolished without compensation. Britain, however, had paid £20,000,000 for the emancipation of her slaves, so his questioners were not satisfied. The weak point in George's reasoning was his justification of interest as opposed to rent. Logically, he should have condemned both, since both are forms of unearned income. His middle position exposed him to attacks from two fronts. Conservatives denounced him for going too far; socialists complained that he did not go far enough. To the unintelligent observer he seemed a man who blew hot and cold with the same mouth. This was unjust. Granted George's premises, his attitude to compensation was perfectly consistent. But it was an attitude which was capable of grave misrepresentation. It gave his enemies the excuse to call him a thief, and considerably weakened the force of the appeals he was constantly making to moral justice.

From Newcastle George crossed the border into Scotland.

[1] See pp. 58–62.

Here he met with an even warmer welcome than in England. Scottish radicalism was of a more resolute temper than English, and its hostility to the landed interest was sharpened by memories of the Disruption, when Conservative landlords had refused sites for Free churches. Moreover, Scotland, unlike England, still had a land question. In England the agrarian revolution, which began in the eighteenth century, had run its course. The smallholder and the yeoman had gone down in the battle against enclosing landlords. But in Scotland the fight was not yet over. Groups of crofters in the Highlands, last remnants of a dispossessed race, were fighting a desperate rear-guard action with the triumphant forces of landlordism. Revolt had blazed up in Skye, and Glasgow police and naval ratings had had to be imported to quell the disorder. A government commission was inquiring into the grievances of the crofters, and their case was receiving sympathetic consideration in the press. George found the Scottish public ready to listen with attention to any serious pronouncement on the land question.

He first paid a visit to the disturbed districts in Skye, but though he received a sympathetic hearing he could not sting the crofters into action. They were too cautious or too cowed to imitate the methods of the Irish Land League. George humorously taunted them with their inferiority to Irishmen in this respect. Abroad, he said, the Scots fought like lions; at home, they were as submissive as sheep, and he suggested placing a sheep alongside the lion rampant in the Scottish standard. In the towns he had a better reception. At Dundee, Inverness, Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Edinburgh he spoke to large and appreciative audiences. The industrial areas of Scotland were full of transplanted Gaels, the descendants of victims of the Clearances, who burned to revenge the wrongs of their forbears; and the Lowland Scot, though his quarrel was rather with capitalist employers than thieving landlords, nevertheless felt the charm of the simple gospel preached so persuasively by the eloquent American. At Glasgow a meeting was held to form a Scottish Land Restoration League. The tartan was strongly in evidence, and the

enthusiasm of the audience rose to boiling-point when two pipers marched round the hall, blowing soul-animating strains. Nearly two thousand persons enrolled in the new organization. Branches were established in all the important Scottish towns, and George recrossed the border with the comfortable conviction that he had set the heather blazing furiously.

In England he lectured at Leeds, Oxford, Cambridge, and Hull. The Oxford meeting was the most sensational of the series. George was the guest of Max Müller the distinguished orientalist, and his chairman was York Powell the historian. Despite this powerful platform support, the meeting, composed mainly of undergraduates, was bitterly hostile. George had difficulty in getting through his speech. He decided to cut it short and call for questions. Thereupon a high-pitched voice made itself heard from the body of the hall. It belonged to Alfred Marshall, then lecturer at Balliol.[1] George could not know that he had before him the future founder of the Cambridge School of Economics, nor did the questioner's manner suggest that he was different from the general run of truculent hecklers with whom George had commonly to deal. Marshall at this time was full of the intolerance of the specialist for the amateur. He told George bluntly that what was true in *Progress and Poverty* was not new, and that what was new was not true. George was not the man to take this sort of thing quietly, and he retaliated in kind. But the audience was on Marshall's side, and the flow of interruptions made it difficult for the speaker to reply effectively to his antagonist. Then, to make matters worse, Max Müller's son-in-law, F. C. Conybeare, later well known as an Armenian scholar, jumped to his feet and denounced George's doctrines as "scandalously immoral." George, whose patience was wearing thin, replied with heat, and was afterwards considerably embarrassed to learn that the man whom he had trounced was a relative

[1] Marshall had given three public lectures on *Progress and Poverty* while he was at Bristol in 1881. A lady who was present said that he reminded her of a boa constrictor: "he first slobbered over his victim and then swallowed him."—Fay, *The Corn Laws and Social England*, p. 152.

of his host. The meeting broke up in confusion, and George left Oxford more than ever convinced that the venerable city was the home of lost causes.[1]

At London, George addressed four more meetings, and then crossed to Dublin at Davitt's invitation. His meeting there was a complete failure. The official Nationalists boycotted it, and the audience was small and apathetic. Parnell had never forgiven George for his criticism of the Nationalist land policy. So long as he remained leader of the Irish party single-tax propaganda in Ireland was a sheer waste of time. George was disappointed to find how quickly the popularity he had enjoyed in 1882 had evaporated. But his eyes were at last opened to the real character of the Irish people, and he realized how mistaken he had been in believing that they would ever form the vanguard of the single-tax army. On April 13, 1884, he sailed from Queenstown for New York.

In November he was back in Scotland, at the invitation of the Land Restoration League. His popularity with the Scots had been greatly enhanced by his spirited reply to a criticism of *Progress and Poverty* by the great whig Duke of Argyll, who, incidentally, was the first to name George "the prophet of San Francisco." The League published criticism and defence together, in a pamphlet with the suggestive title of *The Peer and the Prophet*. It had a wide circulation, and proved most effective propaganda. George's second Scottish tour was an unqualified success. The Presbyterian Scots strongly relished the religious flavour of his addresses and crowded to hear him as years before they had flocked to hear Moody and Sankey, American evangelists of a different kind. George made a triumphant progress through the Lowlands, and finished up with a series of meetings in Skye. He felt that at last his apostolic journeys were beginning to bear fruit. Why should not Scotland play the part in the world revolution which he had once assigned to Ireland?

[1] According to one who was present at the meeting, George was infuriated because Conybeare called the single tax a nostrum. "On my side of the Atlantic," he said, "nostrum is not a word that gentlemen use in speaking of each other's projects."—Stephen Gwynn, *Experiences of a Literary Man*, p. 44.

In January 1885 George was back in London. He was the chief speaker at a great open-air meeting of the unemployed, held one Saturday afternoon outside the Royal Exchange. Though John Burns and Jack Williams organized a counter-demonstration and drew away part of the crowd, it was estimated that two thousand persons were present. Keenly alive to the rhetorical possibilities of his surroundings, George pointed to the inscription over the Exchange. "Look up there," he cried. "'The earth is the Lord's.'" A voice interrupted, "The landlords." "Aye," continued George, "the landlords. They have established the landlords for the Lord above all; and the, want and unemployment, the misery which exists from one end of the kingdom to the other, the misery which encircles society wherever civilization goes, is caused by the sin of the denial of justice."

Before he left for home George ventured on another visit to Ireland. This time he tried Belfast. Perhaps the Ulstermen might be more responsive to his message than the Milesian Irishmen of the south. The experiment was disastrous. The Dublin Nationalists had boycotted him. The Belfast Orangemen tried to wreck his meeting. The hall was packed with a hostile crowd, who threw the chairs about, stormed the platform, extinguished the lights, and fought the police. George had to admit that there was no corner of the Emerald Isle where he was sure of a welcome. His disillusionment with things Irish was complete. On January 25, 1885, he embarked at Queenstown for home.