

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE LAST BATTLE

DURING the years when he was at work on *The Science of Political Economy* George was supported mainly by the bounty of Tom Johnson and August Lewis. The *Standard*, after languishing for years, finally expired in 1892, and George would have been thrown back on casual journalism but for the intervention of his two generous friends. As he said in the dedication to them of his unfinished work, they, "of their own motion and without suggestion or thought of mine," begged the privilege of relieving him from pecuniary care, that he might have leisure and peace of mind to finish his book. In the last year of his life this financial assistance became less necessary. An English admirer, Silas Burroughs, member of a famous firm of druggists, left him a substantial legacy which made him practically independent of outside help.

For many years George had occupied one of New York's old brown stone houses in Nineteenth Street, but in 1895 he shifted to Fort Hamilton, Long Island, to a house which was the property of Tom Johnson. It was a refreshing change from the gloomy squalor of the East Side. In *The Science of Political Economy* (p. 364) George described with gusto the cheerful sights he could see from his study window :

" the flowers in the garden ; the planted trees of the orchard ; the cow that is browsing beneath them ; the Shore Road under the window ; the vessels that lie at anchor near the bank, and the little pier that juts out from it ; the transatlantic liner steaming through the channel ; the crowded pleasure-steamers passing by ; the puffing tug with its line of mud-scows ; the fort and dwellings on the opposite side of the Narrows ; the

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lighthouse that will soon begin to cast its far-gleaming eye from Sandy Hook; the big wooden elephant of Coney Island; and the graceful sweep of the Brooklyn Bridge, that may be discovered from a little higher up."

In a letter to Johnson he declared his new quarters to be the most comfortable he had ever worked in since he wrote *Progress and Poverty*.

The tonic of a change was very necessary to George at this time. He had much to discourage him. Public interest in himself and his theories had faded, and a blight seemed to have descended on the single tax movement. Distinguished personalities continued to announce their adhesion to the cause—William Lloyd Garrison, son of the Liberator; James Herne, author of the celebrated play, *Shore Acres*; and, most notable of all, Count Tolstoy.<sup>1</sup> But the movement had lost its power to capture popular support. The schism of 1887 had left wounds which time had not healed. The single tax forces were scattered and dispirited. In order to give George's followers something to work for, Louis Post and others had the idea of organizing a great national petition to Congress. For several years signatures were collected, and when the petition was finally presented in 1892, 115,502 names had been secured. Not all of these, however, were genuine single taxers. The petition merely asked for an inquiry into the feasibility of the single tax. Congress, needless to say, gave it short shrift. The House of Representatives referred it to its Ways and Means Committee, where it was quietly shelved. As an attempt to influence legislative opinion it was an abject failure, but it did fulfil its main purpose of bringing single taxers together. Single tax clubs were founded in numerous localities, and in 1890, after a national conference in New York, these were federated into the Single Tax League of the United States. The League gave single taxers a common organization, but it was weak numerically and poor financially. Its influence on public opinion was slight. A second national conference at Chicago in 1893 was

<sup>1</sup> See Tolstoy's essay on "A Great Iniquity," reprinted in the Centenary Edition of his *Works*, vol. xxi., pp. 272-306.

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poorly attended, despite the attractions of the great International Fair, which was held at the same time and place.<sup>1</sup>

Various plans to infuse fresh vitality into the movement were considered about this time by single taxers. The establishment of single tax colonies was suggested, and one was actually founded at Fairhope, Alabama. George, however, did not approve of this policy. He maintained rightly that if his scheme was to get a fair chance it must be tried out on a large scale. The capture of a single State of the Union seemed a more promising idea, and it was put into execution in 1895-96. Delaware was selected as the point of attack. After Rhode Island, it was the smallest State in the Union, and its electoral population of 40,000 was concentrated mainly in the neighbourhood of the chief town, Wilmington, which was within easy reach of Philadelphia. In the summer of 1895 an army of single taxers descended on the Diamond State. On foot and on bicycles they penetrated to the remotest villages; they canvassed indefatigably; they addressed hundreds of open-air meetings; they deluged the State with single tax literature. "As goes Delaware, so goes the Union" was their slogan. After twelve months of intensive campaigning the Delaware Single Tax Party ran candidates for the governorship and other important offices. The result was a sorry anticlimax. Out of a total poll of 38,000 the single tax voters numbered 1,173. Next year the citizens of Delaware,

<sup>1</sup> At this conference the delegates showed their independence by carrying an important motion in opposition to George. "There was pathos in the picture," writes Louis Post, "as I saw him marching demurely up the aisle at the tail-end of the minority procession of negative voters."—*The Prophet of San Francisco*, p. 148.

According to Thomas Beer, in *The Mauve Decade*, pp. 37-38, George was much impressed by the International Fair. "He stood one night with Charles Nolan watching the crowds of the Midway, and dreamed aloud: 'The people had done all this. It was 'of the people, by the people, for the people.' The lawyer argued: 'No, most of the money was subscribed by rich men. The people had nothing to do with designing these buildings.' The economist pulled his beard and sighed. Anyhow, the people were enjoying it, and his friend Altgeld would govern Illinois. Perhaps the Kingdom of God was a little nearer. He strolled among the crowd and scandalized a waiter at the Auditorium by demanding for late supper cold, stewed tomatoes, sugared, while his host drank champagne." Altgeld was the governor who pardoned the Chicago anarchists and became in consequence the bugbear of the conservatives.

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incensed at the attempt to make their State the scene of a Utopian experiment, inserted a clause in their constitution forbidding for ever taxes which aimed at the confiscation of land.

As a vote-catching device the single tax suffered from the disability that it promised no direct advantage to any powerful or numerous class. The strength behind political movements lies in the material or sectional interests that they represent. This is the germ of truth in the economic interpretation of history. George never allowed this idea to influence his propaganda. He was frequently accused of exciting class against class, but the charge was unjust. Hailed on one occasion as the friend of labour, he retorted, "I have never advocated nor asked for special rights or special sympathy for working men. What I stand for is the equal rights of all men." So universal an appeal produced a feeble response. It attracted individuals. It did not stir homogeneous bodies of men. George aroused a fitful enthusiasm among the workers of the towns, but on the whole they were lukewarm to his cause. Trade unionism and socialism ranked prior in their affections. In any case, the political influence of the urban proletariat was slight. The boss and the machine saw to it that the great cities were the pocket boroughs of the rich. The only really independent element in American political life was the agrarian West, which on three famous occasions, under Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln, had come to the rescue of republican liberty. If George could have converted the Westerners, the single tax would at once have entered the sphere of practical politics. But the wide diffusion of landownership in the West made this impossible. How can you persuade a man who owns his farm that all taxation ought to be raised from the land?

Events sometimes come to the help of ideas, and speak more eloquently to men than words. The threat of national bankruptcy precipitated the French Revolution. The World War shook down Russian Tsarism and erected Communism on its ruins. No such powerful allies came to the aid of George's propaganda. No national disaster disturbed the complacency of the American mind. No social

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earthquake rocked the foundations of American capitalism. The stability of later nineteenth-century life opposed insurmountable obstacles to the social innovator. Against the self-satisfied ideology of a prosperous middle class the waves of radical doctrine dashed themselves in vain.

Some glimmering of this helped to confirm George in his political opportunism. He discouraged independent political action on the part of his followers, and advocated the permeation of the older parties. He himself remained an independent supporter of the Democrats. Cleveland's record during his second presidential term had disappointed him, but his hopes revived when the Democratic Convention of 1896 nominated Bryan on a free-silver platform. With the monetary heresies of the silver-tongued demagogue George had no sympathy. Personally, he was a paper currency man. But he realized the deep significance of Bryan's challenge. It was a summons to the democratic West to rise again in defence of popular rights against the plutocratic East. To George there was not a shadow of doubt on which side a lover of liberty should cast himself. He enlisted under Bryan's standard and prophesied a resounding victory for the Democrats. But, as in most of his political forecasts, he was mistaken. M'Kinley won by half a million votes.

• Defeat of western silver,  
Defeat of the wheat.  
Victory of letter-files  
And plutocrats in miles  
With dollar signs upon their coats,  
Diamond watch chains on their vests,  
And spats on their feet.<sup>1</sup>

The result was an acute disappointment to George. "What did free silver matter," he cried, "the people have lost again." There was reason for his pessimism. For the first time in American history the West had gone down in a straight fight with the East. It was an ominous event for the future of the Republic.

The year 1897 opened sadly for George. He had a tem-

<sup>1</sup> Vachel Lindsay.

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porary breakdown in health, and this was followed by a stunning domestic calamity. His elder daughter, Jennie, now married, died with startling suddenness while on a visit to her parents. Sickness, bereavement, and the dreariness of the political outlook gave George's thoughts a melancholy tinge. He began to be oppressed by a sense of failure. Walking one evening with Louis Post through Union Square, he exclaimed bitterly, "How hard it is to realize, now that my name seems to have been forgotten by the general public, that no longer ago than in 1886 and 1887 great crowds were surging by the park cottage over yonder, shouting 'George! George! Henry George!'" The loss of his popularity was hard to bear, but life had still a consolation prize to offer him. He was to breathe once more the congenial atmosphere of battle. He was to stand on platforms and win the applause of crowds. A dying glory was to fall like a gleam of winter sunshine over this last depressing phase of his career.

In the autumn of 1897 the citizens of New York had to choose a new mayor. It was an election of unusual importance. The city boundaries had just been extended to include Brooklyn and other communities. New York had been enlarged to twice its old size, and its new civic head would rule over 3½ million people and dispense patronage worth \$300 million. Except the Presidency, there was no richer political position in the Union.

The retiring mayor, Strong, was a reformer. Three years before, in a fit of virtue, the electorate had driven Tammany from office. Croker had retired to England, where he lived the life of a country gentleman and indulged his taste for the turf. But now he was on his way back, eager to avenge the discomfiture of 1894. He was confident of success. He told the reporters that Tammany would win by 100,000.

Croker's candidate was Judge Van Wyck, a blue-blooded descendant of the early Dutch settlers, related to all the important Knickerbocker families of New York. Personally of unblemished character, he was, as a politician, utterly insignificant. This was why Croker chose him. Such a man would be wax in the hands of the unscrupulous Tammany chief. Indeed, his candidature was taken as an

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intimation that Croker was fighting with the gloves off. There was not to be even the pretence of conciliating the better class citizens by running a candidate of independent character.

The Citizens Union, the reform party, put forward Seth Low, a wealthy business man, twice mayor of Brooklyn, and now President of Columbia University. Though standing on a non-party platform, Low was personally a Republican, and it was hoped that the Republican caucus would allow him a clear run. Platt, Republican boss of New York State, had other ideas. As a professional politician, he hated reformers, and Low was a "mugwump," anyway. He had bolted in 1884 and voted for Cleveland. At Platt's instigation the Republican machine put forward General Tracy, an elderly lawyer and Civil War veteran. Finally, the anti-Tammany Democrats declined to support Low because he was a Republican, and decided to run a candidate of their own. They offered the nomination to George.

There were a hundred reasons why George should refuse. His health was bad; the contest would probably kill him; his great book was unfinished. But the old fighter could not resist the smell of gunpowder. One by one he set aside the objections of his friends. His book was practically finished. What he had written would clearly indicate the nature of his thought. His health was his own concern. He would willingly sacrifice it in the cause of duty. When warned that the strain of the fight might prove fatal, his eyes blazed and he retorted, "Wouldn't it be glorious to die in that way?" At the nomination meeting he cried, "I would not refuse if I died for it. What counts a few years? What can man do better or nobler than something for his country, for his nation, for his age?" His instinct was right. Better to go down fighting gloriously than to rust out in obscurity as he was doing. Death, if it came, would crown him with the martyr's halo. Posterity would inscribe his name on the great roll of those who died for their beliefs.

"The Party of Thomas Jefferson" (so, at George's suggestion, the anti-Tammany Democrats called them-

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selves) left their candidate a free hand in the drafting of his programme. George demanded tax reform and the municipalization of public services. He denounced corrupt government, the issue of court injunctions against strikes, and the use of police violence against strikers. These sentiments rallied to his side the labour forces of New York. His enemies raked up the old charges against him. He was accused of stirring up class war and of inflaming the foreign element against the respectable citizens. The local correspondent of the English *Times* informed his readers that "European anarchists, socialists, visionaries and all the refuse of European society which has drifted across the Atlantic and clings to the waterside of New York is all for Mr. George."<sup>1</sup>

In the opposing camps the appearance of the new candidate at first spread consternation. Experienced politicians predicted for George the first or second place, and the betting on Van Wyck, which had been 3 to 1, shortened to 5 to 4. But in a few days this mood of alarm passed away. "The Party of Thomas Jefferson," it was realized, was after all a minority group. The real fight lay between Van Wyck and Low. George might help Low by detaching Democratic voters from Tammany. This was the only significance of his candidature. Tracy, on the other hand, was a secret ally of Van Wyck. He was stealing Republican votes from the reform candidate.

George cared nothing for these calculations and prognostications. The prospect of battle acted on him as a tonic, and he fought as one who meant to win. He had promised his friends to spare himself, but soon discretion was flung to the winds and he was addressing three or four meetings a day. This was in marked contrast to his opponents, who trusted to the party canvass and seldom opened their mouths in public. George declared his fervent belief in "honest democracy, the democracy that believes that all men are created equal." He asserted that it was a social not a political battle that he was fighting. If returned, he undertook to put Croker behind prison bars. Croker professed amazement at this onslaught on his

<sup>1</sup> *Times*, October 4, 1897.



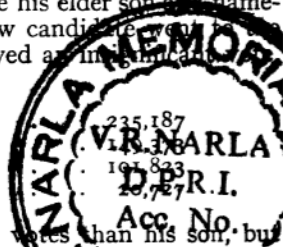
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character. "There is nothing they can prove against me," he said.

As the campaign progressed the strain began to tell heavily on George. He was no longer the man of 1886. The old snap and vigour were gone. The fire of his oratory blazed up only fitfully. Sometimes he almost fainted from weakness on the platform. Still, he struggled on gallantly till the last week of the election. Then, five days before polling day, the overwrought brain snapped. On Thursday evening, 28th October, George addressed five meetings, beginning at Whitestone, Long Island, and finishing at the Central Opera House, New York. It was nearly midnight when he got back to the hotel where he was staying in Union Square. His friends, already alarmed by a slight incoherency in his last speech, noted with anxiety the deathly pallor of his face which betrayed his extreme fatigue. However, after a light supper and a cigar he seemed to revive. His friends were reassured, and left him. George retired to rest. During the night Mrs. George missed him from her side. She went to look for him and found him standing in an adjoining room, his hands convulsively gripping the back of a chair, his body rigid, his head thrown back, his lips murmuring helplessly, "Yes, yes, yes." A second apoplectic stroke had fallen. This time the blow was mortal. George lost consciousness and died at five o'clock in the morning, in the presence of his wife, his elder son, and his two devoted friends, Johnson and Lewis.

His political managers had at once to take a decision with regard to the election. They resolved to fight on, and nominated in the dead man's place his elder son and namesake, Henry George, Jr. The new candidate went to the poll on 2nd November, but received an insignificant vote. The figures were :

|                           |         |
|---------------------------|---------|
| Van Wyck . . . . .        | 235,187 |
| Seth Low . . . . .        | 118,388 |
| Tracy . . . . .           | 107,833 |
| Henry George, Jr. . . . . | 20,727  |



George might have secured more votes than his son, but it is doubtful if his position on the ballot would have been

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different. Death came just in time to save him from a bitter humiliation.

In any case, nothing could have prevented the success of Tammany. The "Wigwam" had won the most smashing victory in its history. The fickle New York populace, disgusted with a reform administration that raised the rates and strictly enforced the liquor laws, was resolved to put the connivers at vice back into power. On election night the riff-raff of the town gave itself up to a wild orgy of rejoicing over Croker's triumph. Prostitutes danced for joy in the streets. Excited men tore along with banners proclaiming "To hell with Reform." A band at the Haymarket played "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-night."

While these disreputable scenes were being enacted, George was in his grave. The tragedy of his death had silenced the voice of detraction and produced a revulsion of feeling in his favour. Appreciative obituary notices appeared in all the papers; political opponents paid tribute to the dead man's disinterestedness; even the mob, though it could not understand him, felt a sentimental interest in one who had given his life for his ideas. Vast multitudes attended the funeral. On Sunday forenoon the body lay in state in the Grand Central Palace, and thousands of New Yorkers filed past the bier. In the afternoon the building was packed for a memorial service. Leading clergymen pronounced eulogies on the deceased, and the crowd, breaking through the restraint of convention, testified its approbation by vigorous applause. Then the coffin was borne to the funeral car, and the thousands of mourners fell in behind. An eye-witness has described the memorable scene :

"As evening came on, the funeral procession moved. Down Broadway it came, on its way to Brooklyn and Greenwood, and profoundly impressive was the sight as the cortege swung around the bend of Broadway at Grace Church. Although but early evening, it was dark. Lights and shadows seemed mysteriously blended. The heaviest bell of the church was heavily tolling, and the tolling was sad and drear and of tremendous solemnity. The body of the dead man was borne

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high on a lofty open catafalque, which was all black, and the coffin shook and rocked as the wheels jolted over the roughness of the pavement. Alone, in front, with head and shoulders drooping, rode a man on horseback, the chief mourner and friend, Tom Johnson, himself a figure of national importance, but now likewise gone. Behind came fifers playing the saddening notes of 'Flee as a Bird to the Mountain'; and behind these, marching solemnly between the black and deserted fronts of the business houses and past this church, there followed thousands upon thousands of men on foot. It made a picture of tremendous intensity."<sup>1</sup>

The procession wound its way across Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn City Hall, and there the coffin was handed over to the relatives. Next day, after a service in the home at Fort Hamilton, what was mortal of Henry George was carried to Greenwood Cemetery and buried in the grave of his beloved daughter. "All was enveloped in the soft grey light of an autumn day," his son tells us, "and beyond to the south lay the shimmering Atlantic."

On the spot a memorial stone was raised later, with these words from *Progress and Poverty* (p. 393) :

"The truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends—those who will toil for it; suffer for it; if need be, die for it. This is the power of Truth."

The appropriateness of the epitaph may be questioned. Truth is hard to find, and many earnest seekers after it go astray. Enough has been said in this book of the strong infusion of error which George's theory contains. It is not as a discoverer of infallible truth that the world will remember him. His title to fame lies elsewhere—in the sphere of character and motives. An unshaken belief in social justice, an unwavering fidelity to a social ideal, a dauntless courage which did not shrink from the last full measure of devotion—these are the patents of his nobility and the enduring grounds of his reputation. In his own regal prose he has described the imperious summons which

<sup>1</sup> Robert Shackleton, *The Book of New York*, pp. 79-80.

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comes to choice spirits to enlist in the eternal war against unrighteousness.

“Ormuzd still fights with Ahriman—the Prince of Light with the Powers of Darkness. He who will hear, to him the clarions of the battle call. How they call, and call, and call, till the heart swells that hears them! Strong soul and high endeavour, the world needs them now. Beauty still lies imprisoned, and iron wheels go over the good and true and beautiful that might spring from human lives. And they who fight with Ormuzd, though they may not know each other—somewhere, sometime, will the muster roll be called.”<sup>1</sup>

It is as one of this immortal company that George will be remembered. He was a brave soldier in the liberation war of humanity. By his life and death he testified his faith in the spiritual forces that govern the world.

Whoever fights, whoever falls,  
Justice conquers evermore.

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<sup>1</sup> *Progress and Poverty*, pp. 399-400.