

CHAPTER VI.

FIRST SET POLITICAL SPEECH.

1876-1877.

AGE, 37-38.

WILLIAM S. IRWIN, Democrat, the new Governor of California, was sworn in at the State Capitol at Sacramento on January 1, 1876, and one of his first acts was to appoint Henry George to what was regarded as among the most lucrative offices within the Executive gift—State Inspector of Gas Meters. He did this partly from a motive of assisting a man who had through the “Evening Post” and the “Morning Ledger” done much to help his election. But E. W. Maslin, who was the Governor’s private secretary, says that another motive played an important part in the matter.

“Henry George was recognised as nominally a Democrat, but not a partisan. He had no political backing and was regarded to be without political claims upon the Governor. It was therefore a political surprise when he was appointed Gas-Meter Inspector. The appointment was more than anything else a tribute to intellect.

“I was the Governor’s private secretary, and in the leisure hours of the office we were accustomed to discuss books, public men and measures. The Governor was chary of giving praise, yet not once but many times he expressed his strong admiration for Mr. George’s intel-

lectual ability, and laid peculiar stress upon his logical mind, power of statement and clear and brilliant style. In one of those conversations he declared that George possessed the clearest and finest style of all English writers. I was not surprised that the Governor should speak of the logic and power of statement, for this arose from the character of his own mind. He had little imagination, but he was logical, well read and highly trained. I was not surprised that he should speak of similar qualities in George; but I was astonished that the latter's style should have attracted his attention. I myself had in 1871, when Secretary of the State Board of Equalisation, supplied George with some statistical matter which he used at the time in his pamphlet, 'Our Land and Land Policy,' and I had read a number of things, long and short, from his pen afterwards; but though I recognised his ability, I did not appreciate his mode of expression, as did the Governor. The fact that this cold, unimpassioned man should so often break into praise of George's 'elegant and brilliant style' made a profound impression on me."

Henry George took official charge on January 13 and within a few days began to "test" the registry of meters by forcing a measured quantity of air through them in place of gas, fastening a brass seal on all that met the lawful requirements. A set fee was allowed on every meter so tested and sealed.

The office of inspector of gas meters had been established for the protection of gas consumers and did much to correct impositions. But a loop-hole had been left, perhaps inadvertently, by which the law did not reach some of the towns scattered over the State, where large numbers of meters, purchased from or through the San Francisco Gas Company or its officials, had without being inspected and sealed been put into use. George, or rather his friends who were most zealous for his interests, had

an amendment introduced into the legislature which should compel companies to submit for inspection all unsealed meters in use or intended for immediate use. The gas companies, and particularly the San Francisco company through its president, raised hot opposition. After cutting off some features to which the companies particularly objected, the measure went through and the inspector during the next few months went to the chief cities throughout the State and demanded that all unsealed meters be brought to him to be tested, his brother, John V. George, going with him to assist in the work. Though at first by virtue of this amendment of the inspection law, Mr. George obtained what seemed to him like large sums of money from places like Marysville and Grass Valley where numbers of untested meters were in use, the office of inspector yielded only an intermittent revenue and on the whole only enough to live on comfortably and without extravagance. Mr. George for a while entertained the expectation of going East in the summer to visit the old folks and to see the international exposition then to be opened with great ceremony at Philadelphia in commemoration of the hundredth celebration of the nation's independence. This had to be given up, as for the time the receipts from the office fell off.

"Though my official duties were light," said Mr. George when reviewing this period,¹ "I never ate the bread of idleness, but was always very hard at work." Among the matters engaging him were a number of measures before the State legislature and chief of these were two bills introduced by William M. Pierson in the Senate, both relating to the publication of newspapers, one to compel the retraction of false or defamatory articles and the other

¹ Meeker notes.

requiring the signature of all original articles or correspondence. Mr. George was particularly interested in the latter and wrote in support of it two bright, vivacious, signed articles for the "Sacramento Bee," which were afterwards printed in pamphlet form. His contention was that the march of concentration was putting newspapers more and more into the hands of massed capital, making newspaper workers more and more dependent upon special interests and utterly helpless to get outside recognition so long as they should work anonymously.

"The effect of the present anonymous system is to make the newspaper everything, the writer nothing. The tendency of the personal system would be to transfer importance and power from the newspaper to the writers—to diffuse instead of to concentrate; to make the men who see for the people and think for the people independent of capital, instead of dependent on capital; and to facilitate the establishment of new papers whenever the old ones abandoned the popular cause."

He got some personal satisfaction from this article, for he wrote to his wife (March 14): "I spent a good part of the afternoon listening to the debate in the Senate upon the signature bill. Uncle Phil [Philip A. Roach, one of the editors and part proprietor of the "San Francisco Examiner"] threw himself in opposition, though he made a very handsome allusion to me, as all the principal speakers have done." Both the signature and the retraction bill, while they passed the Senate, had the powerful opposition of the San Francisco papers and were killed in the House.

As helping to make his ideas known, the articles in support of the signature bill were probably worth the effort he made, but a few months later there was an occurrence

of much greater importance to Mr. George personally—the first set speech. At various times, beginning as far back as 1865 when a member of the Sacramento Lyceum, he had got upon his feet for a few impromptu remarks. Now came a chance for a formal effort. The Presidential campaign was opening, with Governor Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, candidate of the Republican party, and Governor Samuel J. Tilden of New York, for the Democratic. Mr. George entered on the campaign with lively feelings, for Hayes, he considered, represented the reactionary policy of his party, while Tilden, he believed, was a free trader, and while demanding the remission of war-tax burdens, would take the side of the industrial masses, just now idle in thousands all over the country.

Animated by something akin to the admiration Governor Irwin had for George's abilities, a number of energetic young men of radical opinion in San Francisco, enrolled in what was known as the "Tilden and Hendricks Central Club," asked Mr. George to speak under its auspices, hoping, as one of them, Walter Gallagher, said, "to make this speech the keynote of the canvass in California." George was thereupon formally invited. He spoke before a big meeting in Dashaway Hall on the evening of August 15, on "The Question Before the People." He stood beside the reading desk on which he had his manuscript spread out, read by glances and spoke slowly and distinctly. He avoided the usual political declamation and struck a high tone at once.

"Remember this, the political contest is lifted above the low plane of denunciation and demagogism, and becomes not a contest for spoils in which the people are simply permitted to choose which gang shall plunder them; but a solemn, momentous inquiry, demanding from each voter a conscientious judgment."

The kernel of the speech was this:

“The Federal tax-gatherer is everywhere. In each exchange by which labour is converted into commodities, there he is standing between buyer and seller to take his to’l. Whether it be a match or a locomotive, a dish-cloth or a dress, a new book or a glass of beer, the tax-gatherer steps in. He says to Labour as the day’s toil begins: ‘Ah! you want to do a little work for yourself and family. Well, first work an hour to pay the interest on the national debt and defray the necessary expenses of government; and then another hour for the national banks and subsidised corporations, and the expenses of governing the Southern States! Then an hour for the army and navy and the contractors thereof; then an hour for the manufacturers of New England, and an hour for the iron millionaires of Pennsylvania; half an hour for the Marine Corps and the various comfortable little bureaus; and then, after you have done a little work for your State Government, and a little work for your county and municipal government, and a little work for your landlord—then you can have the rest of the day to work for yourself and family.’ . . .

“Fellow-citizens, negro slavery is dead! But cast your eyes over the North to-day and see a worse than negro slavery taking root under the pressure of the policy you are asked as Republicans to support by your votes. See seventy thousand men out of work in the Pennsylvania coal-fields; fifty thousand labourers asking for bread in the city of New York; the almshouses of Massachusetts crowded to repletion in the summer-time; unemployed men roving over the West in great bands, stealing what they cannot earn. . . . It is an ominous thing that in this Centennial year, States that a century ago were covered by the primeval forest should be holding conventions to consider the ‘tramp nuisance’—the sure symptom of that leprosy of nations, chronic pauperism. . . .

“Be not deceived! You might as well charge the bullet or the knife with being the cause of the death

of a murdered man as to think that all the things of which you complain result from the accident of having had bad men in office. What can any change of men avail so long as the policy which is the primary cause of these evils is unchanged?"

Ex-District Attorney Thomas P. Ryan was president of the club. He presided at this meeting and says of the speaker and the speech:

"At that time he looked to me to be about thirty years of age. He impressed me then, as he always did, as being a man of naturally nervous temperament, but one who had so schooled himself as to give no expression as a rule to that fact by his manner. In repose his habit was calm, almost placid, and age sits lightly upon those so blessed. In action there was no want of fire, and when the situation required, it was fittingly displayed. If we rate his speech that night by the standard of eloquence of the great French orator, Bishop Dupanloup—a thorough knowledge of one's subject—he was indeed eloquent. That the address was extraordinarily able and convincing was the universal opinion of those who heard it. The impression it left on me is lasting and the best evidence of its force and effect is to be found in the fact that at this late day I am, almost without effort, able to recall in the main most of the facts then presented and the circumstances surrounding the speech's delivery.

"At its conclusion, Mr. James G. Maguire, since so devoted a disciple of Henry George, and distinguished as an upright judge and Member of Congress, arose and said that it was the ablest political address to which he had ever listened, and moved that it be printed for distribution as a campaign document, which was done.

"The audience was a large and most appreciative one, Governor Irwin, among other distinguished men, being present.

"Touching this speech, and indeed, of everything else Henry George said and wrote subsequently, I have car-

ried in my mind the thought so happily expressed by Mommsen in speaking of Renan: 'He is a savant in spite of his fine style.' ”

This Dashaway Hall speech was carefully prepared. Mr. Gallagher tells of an unprepared one that Henry George made very soon afterwards.

“Some days after the Dashaway Hall meeting Mr. George was present at a very large and enthusiastic meeting at the Mission in Humboldt Hall. I was expected to speak at that meeting and did not expect to see Henry George there. Cameron H. King, I think, presided. Mr. George, who was familiar to a large number in the audience, was vociferously called for. He was very backward about responding and hesitated quite a while before he was finally persuaded to go upon the rostrum. I think I can picture him now in my mind's eye as he appeared on that night. He was sitting close up to the front where he could easily see and hear all that was going on. He held a little old soft felt hat crumpled up tightly in his hand. When he finally made up his mind to respond to the cheers and calls he went with a rush. It seemed to me that he ran to the rostrum and immediately in a loud, full voice, at a very high pitch, entered into a discussion of the issues before the people—all the time holding his hat in his hand. The audience expected a different kind of speech from him than from the rest of us. The audience was not disappointed, for what he said was full of thought and force. But I remember that his elocution was not of the best. He was earnest and sincere, but his manner and gesticulation were not to be commended as accompaniments of oratory. He did not have the proper control of his voice, and there appeared to be in his manner an absolute disregard for those little arts of the orator which have so much effect upon a crowd.”

But it was the speech on “The Question Before the People” that attracted chief attention and the Democratic

State Committee invited him to "stump" the State and deliver it in the principal cities and towns. From no speaking reputation whatever, he sprang through this one address to the place of a leading speaker in California, and was given the honour of making the final speech of the campaign in Platt's Hall, San Francisco. Dr. Shorb was chairman and knew George well, but amused himself by introducing him as "Colonel Henry D. George." Mr. George, somewhat disconcerted, protested that he had neither a title nor a middle initial, whereupon somebody in the audience shouted: "Oh, go ahead, Harry. We all know who you are."

So the campaign passed; election day came and went, and the decision was not yet clear when Mr. George wrote to his mother (November 13) touching his personal interests:

"Well, the campaign is over, though its result is as yet unsettled. I cannot say that I am glad that it is over, for although I think Tilden is President, the way this coast went is a great disappointment to me; but at any rate I shall now have a resting spell—a longer one and a better one than I have had before.

"I did my best, for my heart was in it, and that is a consolation. And personally what I accomplished was very gratifying. I have shown that I could make myself felt without a newspaper, and shown that I possessed other ability than that of the pen. I have always felt that I possessed the requisites for a first-class speaker, and that I would make one if I could get the practice; and I started into this campaign with the deliberate purpose of breaking myself in. It was like jumping overboard to learn to swim. But I succeeded. I think no man in the State made as much reputation as I have made. From not being known as a speaker I have come to the front. I wanted to do this, not as a matter of vanity or for the mere pleasure of the thing; but to increase my power and usefulness. Already well

known as a writer, I knew that this kind of a reputation would aid me immensely in the future. And so it will—whether I go into politics, into the law or into the newspaper business again. I do not intend to rest here; but to go ahead step by step.

“You need not be afraid of politics doing me harm. I do not propose to mix in lower politics, nor do I propose to chase after nominations. I shall wait till they seek me. I propose to read and study, to write some things which will extend my reputation and perhaps to deliver some lectures with the same view. And if I live I shall make myself known even in Philadelphia. I aim high.

“So far as my personal interests are concerned, defeat is as good to me as a sweeping victory—in fact, I think better, as a man of my kind has a chance of coming forward more rapidly in a minority than in a majority party. However, about all such things, I am disposed to think that whatever happens is for the best. Talent and energy can nearly always convert defeats into victories. I could easily have started a paper during the campaign, and could, I think, readily do so now. But I don't feel like going back into newspaper harness. The best thing for me, I think, is to keep out of newspapers for a while.”

Thus he wrote of himself. What he meant by wanting to be a speaker “not as a matter of vanity or for the mere pleasure of the thing,” but to increase his “power and usefulness,” he could not bring himself to tell any one as yet. He must wait for time to show even his mother the exalted purpose he had in his heart of hearts.

When he wrote to his mother, Mr. George believed that Tilden had been elected President. It was conceded that the Democratic candidate had received the largest popular vote, and that from the States where the returns were undisputed he had received one hundred and eighty four

electoral votes, so that he lacked just one vote of the number required to elect, while Hayes lacked twenty. The difficulty lay with the returns of Oregon and three Southern States—Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida—which were contested. This condition of things, involving such great consequences, could not fail to stir to the depths an active participant in public affairs like Henry George. As weeks passed without a settlement and the time fixed by the constitution for the inauguration of the new President approached, he became so aroused that in January he wrote a long presentation of the matter and put it in the form of an eight paged pamphlet entitled, "Who shall be President?—A Survey of the Political Situation," saying that the fact that who should be President should be treated as an open question was "both scandalous and dangerous"—scandalous because the uncertainty implied "a doubt of the efficacy of law"; and dangerous "because when law fails, force is the necessary resort." He made a careful analysis of the matter to show why he believed Tilden was entitled to the office, giving his explanation of the persistent contention by the Hayes partisans that "a coup d'état was contemplated."

It was Mr. George's intention to send this paper East, where he thought it would get consideration; but before he could carry out his plan news came that Tilden had given his consent to remand the question of returns to the decision of an electoral commission—a tribunal specially created by Congress. This commission, composed of eight Republicans and seven Democrats, by a party vote decided in favour of the Republican electors in every case, thus awarding 185 electoral votes to Hayes and 184 to Tilden, and placing Hayes in the Presidential chair.

Nine years after this, in the pages of his "Protection or

Free Trade," Henry George gave expression to a great change of feeling towards Mr. Tilden.¹

"A wealthy citizen whom I once supported, and called on others to support, for the Presidential chair, under the impression that he was a Democrat of the school of Jefferson, has recently published a letter advising us to steel plate our coasts, lest foreign navies come over and bombard us. This counsel of timidity has for its hardly disguised object the inducing of such an enormous expenditure of public money as will prevent any demand for the reduction of taxation, and thus secure to the tariff rings a longer lease of plunder. It well illustrates the essential meanness of the protectionist spirit—a spirit that no more comprehends the true dignity of the American Republic and the grandeur of her possibilities than it cares for the material interests of the great masses of her citizens—the poor people who have to work."

¹ Chap. XXX, (Memorial Edition, p. 327).