

CHAPTER VII.

LECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA.

1877.

AGE, 38.

As by distinct stages, Henry George's mind showed development. In the first half of 1877 came the last two stages before it was to break into full flower. The first of these took the form of a lecture on political economy before the University of California; the second, of an oration on the Fourth of July.

Scarcely had the Presidential question ceased to absorb him when he was invited to deliver several lectures before the students and faculty of the University of California which now had been established permanently at Berkeley, adjacent to Oakland. He was to be one of a number of prominent men to give a course of addresses on various topics, and the first subject that it was agreed he should treat was "The Study of Political Economy."

There was no separate chair of political economy in the University and now came talk of establishing one, with George to fill it. His Chinese article; his pamphlet, "Our Land and Land Policy"; and many of his "Evening Post" editorials marked him as qualified to hold such a position. It was thought that the lectures he was about to deliver would make the ground of his appointment

Touching this he never afterwards had much to say, in the family observing that there had been talk of a chair and of him to fill it. He never mentioned who of his friends were interested in the project. At the time, possibly from his old habit of secretiveness, but more probably from a feeling of modesty until the project should take definite form, he said nothing about the matter to his wife, except indirectly remarking that there was no title in the world he cared to have save that of "Professor."

At any rate, on March 9, accompanied by his friend, Assemblyman James V. Coffey, he lunched with Professor John Le Conte, the President of the University, after which the three men proceeded to the hall where the students and most of the faculty were gathered. The lecturer read from his manuscript and occupied about three quarters of an hour—probably three quarters of an hour of astonishment for regents and faculty.

He said that as his lecture was to be more suggestive than didactic, he would not attempt to outline the laws of political economy, nor even, where his own views were strong and definite, to touch upon unsettled questions. He wished to show the simplicity and certainty of a science too generally regarded as complex and indeterminate; to point out the ease with which it may be studied, and to suggest reasons which make that study worthy of attention.

"The science which investigates the laws of the production and distribution of wealth concerns itself with matters which among us occupy more than nine tenths of human effort, and perhaps nine tenths of human thought. In its province are included all that relates to the wages of labour and the earnings of capital; all regulations of trade; all questions of currency and finance; all taxes and public disbursements—in short, everything that can in any way affect the amount of wealth which a community can secure, or the propor-

tion in which that wealth will be distributed between individuals. Though not the science of government, it is essential to the science of government. Though it takes direct cognisance only of what are termed the selfish instincts, yet in doing so it includes the basis of all higher qualities."

A hundred years had elapsed, the lecturer said, since Adam Smith published his "Wealth of Nations," yet political economy had made little progress. This he thought "referable partly to the nature of the science itself and partly to the manner in which it has been cultivated."

"In the first place, the very importance of the subjects with which political economy deals raises obstacles in its way. The discoveries of other sciences may challenge pernicious ideas, but the conclusions of political economy involve pecuniary interests, and thus thrill directly the sensitive pocket-nerve. For, as no social adjustment can exist without interesting a larger or smaller class in its maintenance, political economy at every point is apt to come in contact with some interest or other which regards it as the silversmiths of Ephesus did those who taught the uselessness of presenting shrines to Diana. . . . What, then, must be the opposition which inevitably meets a science that deals with tariffs and subsidies, with banking interests and bonded debts, with trades-unions and combinations of capital, with taxes and licenses and land tenures! It is not ignorance alone that offers opposition, but ignorance backed by interest, and made fierce by passions.

"Now, while the interests thus aroused furnish the incentive, the complexity of the phenomena with which political economy deals makes it comparatively easy to palm off on the unreasoning all sorts of absurdities as political economy. . . . But what is far worse than any amount of pretentious quackery is, that the science even as taught by the masters is in large measure disjointed and indeterminate. As laid down in the best

text-books, political economy is like a shapely statue but half hewn from the rock—like a landscape, part of which stands out clear and distinct, but over the rest of which the mists still roll. . . . Strength and subtilty have been wasted in intellectual hair splitting and super-refinements, in verbal discussions and disputes, while the great high-roads have remained unexplored. And thus has been given to a simple and attractive science an air of repellent abstruseness and uncertainty.”

And from the same fundamental cause had arisen an idea of political economy which had arrayed against it the feelings and prejudices of those who had most to gain by its cultivation.

“The name of political economy has been constantly invoked against every effort of the working classes to increase their wages or decrease their hours of labour. . . . Take the best and most extensively circulated text-books. While they insist upon freedom for capital, while they justify on the ground of utility the selfish greed that seeks to pile fortune on fortune, and the niggard spirit that steels the heart to the wail of distress, what sign of substantial promise do they hold out to the working man save that he should refrain from rearing children?

“What can we expect when hands that should offer bread thus hold out a stone? Is it in human nature that the masses of men, vaguely but keenly conscious of the injustice of existing social conditions, feeling that they are somehow cramped and hurt, without knowing what cramps and hurts them, should welcome truth in this partial form; that they should take to a science which, as it is presented to them, seems but to justify injustice, to canonise selfishness by throwing around it the halo of utility, and to present Herod rather than Vincent de Paul as the typical benefactor of humanity? Is it to be wondered at that they should turn in their

ignorance to the absurdities of protection and the crazy theories generally designated by the name of socialism?"

What he wished to impress upon his hearers was the "real simplicity of what is generally deemed an abstruse science, and the exceeding ease with which it may be pursued."

"For the study of political economy you need no special knowledge, no extensive library, no costly laboratory. You do not even need text-books nor teachers, if you will but think for yourselves. All that you need is care in reducing complex phenomena to their elements, in distinguishing the essential from the accidental, and in applying the simple laws of human action with which you are familiar. Take nobody's opinion for granted; 'try all things: hold fast that which is good.' In this way, the opinions of others will help you by their suggestions, elucidations and corrections; otherwise they will be to you but as words to a parrot. . . . All this array of professors, all this paraphernalia of learning, cannot educate a man. They can but help him to educate himself. Here you may obtain the tools; but they will be useful only to him who can use them. A monkey with a microscope, a mule packing a library, are fit emblems of the men—and unfortunately, they are plenty—who pass through the whole educational machinery, and come out but learned fools, crammed with knowledge which they cannot use—all the more pitiable, all the more contemptible, all the more in the way of real progress, because they pass, with themselves and others, as educated men."

And then addressing himself directly to the students, he said:

"I trust you have felt the promptings of that highest of ambitions—the desire to be useful in your day and generation; the hope that in something, even though

little, those that come after may be wiser, better, happier than you have lived. Or, if you have never felt this, I trust the feeling is only latent, ready to spring forth when you see the need.

"Gentlemen, if you but look you will see the need! You are of the favoured few, for the fact that you are here, students in a university of this character, bespeaks for you the happy accidents that fall only to the lot of the few, and you cannot yet realise, as you may by and by realise, how the hard struggle which is the lot of so many may cramp and bind and distort—how it may dull the noblest faculties and chill the warmest impulses, and grind out of men the joy and poetry of life; how it may turn into the lepers of society those who should be its adornment, and transmute, into vermin to prey upon it and into wild beasts to fly at its throat, the brain and muscle that should go to its enrichment! These things may never yet have forced themselves on your attention; but still, if you will think of it, you cannot fail to see enough want and wretchedness, even in our own country to-day, to move you to sadness and pity, to nerve you to high resolve; to arouse in you the sympathy that dares, and the indignation that burns to overthrow a wrong. . . .

"Political economy alone can give the answer. And if you trace out, in the way I have tried to outline, the laws of the production and exchange of wealth, you will see the causes of social weakness and disease in enactments which selfishness has imposed on ignorance, and in maladjustments entirely within our own control. . . .

"You will see that the true law of social life is the law of love, the law of liberty, the law of each for all and all for each; that the golden rule of morals is also the golden rule of the science of wealth; that the highest expressions of religious truth include the widest generalisations of political economy."

So much for the nature of the address. The lecturer read his audience correctly, for when he went home he

told his wife that his utterances had been well received by the students, but by the authorities with a polite and dignified quietness that made him think that he might not be invited to lecture again.

What wonder! Was this a sample of what the man was to preach? Perhaps much of what he said was as plain and fair as common sense; but did he propose to go wide of the beaten path—to set up a new scheme of things? Were the faculty and regents to be committed to new principles—principles that they had not yet even considered; that wrenched at old things, that jarred to their centre institutions which, right or wrong, had come down through the generations? Was this Inspector of Gas Meters, this warring newspaper editor, this political speech-maker, who had never given an hour's study inside a university to continue to proclaim among them that "all this array of professors, all this paraphernalia of learning, cannot educate a man," and prate of "a monkey with a microscope" and "a mule packing a library" as emblems of men "passing through the educational machinery"? And then were they—the professors and the regents—to find themselves *willy-nilly* bumping against new problems at every turn? Starting in this way, where was the thing to stop?

This fear of heresy and revolutionary utterance seemed to govern some. Others had a more material reason for opposing the San Francisco man. Through a charge by George in the columns of the "Evening Post" in 1874 of speculation in connection with the building of North Hall or the College of Letters, and a legislative investigation that followed, the Chairman of the Building Committee of the Board of Regents, was requested by the Governor of California to resign, which he did. But he left behind him for the "Post's" editor the resentment of his friends

and of those on or connected with the Board whose lax attention to duty had permitted the scandal to occur.

Thus for perhaps personal and impersonal reasons Mr. George was quietly forgotten. Nothing was said about a chair by those who had the power to confer it. He was not even invited to speak again, although brief notes in his diary lead to the inference that he had commenced work on a second lecture. Yet whatever disappointment arose from this could not have been lasting, as there was uninterrupted interchange of social visits with Professor John Le Conte and his brother, Professor Joseph Le Conte, the physicist, and with other friends at Berkeley.¹ And his high regard for universities as institutions of progressive thought could not have been much, if any, diminished by this incident. Indeed, two years later, when about to launch "Progress and Poverty," it was his expectation that at least some of the professed teachers of political economy would take up the truths he endeavoured to make clear and "fit them in with what of truth was already understood and thought." It was not until subsequently that a change came "o'er the spirit of his dream."

¹ His friend Prof. William Swinton had resigned three years before, and going to New York, had entered upon a remarkably successful career of text-book writing.