

CHAPTER VIII.

A FOURTH OF JULY ORATION.

1877.

AGE, 38.

NOW came the last stage before the writing of "Progress and Poverty."

The oration on the Fourth of July, 1877, like the lecture before the University of California, showed the broad sweep that Mr. George's mind was taking. "Our Land and Land Policy" regarded politico-economical conditions primarily from the standpoint of the Californian; his mind now enveloped the world. Not the progress of California, but human progress, was what engaged him; not particulars, but generals; not a question of policy, but the enunciation of the eternal law of "each for all and all for each."

And as the lecture was the exordium, the Fourth of July speech became the peroration. One pointed to the simplicity of the natural order, the other to the necessity of following it. One turned to the fundamentals of the science relating to the social conditions under which civilised men should get their daily bread; the other sounded the war clarions and gave the battle cry of "liberty and equality." One came from the solitary—the man of the closet; the other from the man of the practical world of struggle and conflict. Each was the complement of the

other—the two primary elements in “Progress and Poverty”—the reflections of the thinker who hands down the law; the call of the leader who marshals the hosts.

A season of depression having set in, and the income of the Inspector of Gas Meters having diminished very considerably, husband and wife decided to reduce domestic expenses. They gave up the San Francisco house, and storing part of the furniture, moved the remainder to Saucelito, a pretty little village on the north side of the bay. There they took a six-roomed cottage, where they lived comfortably during the summer months, the wife doing the domestic work herself. During these Saucelito days Mr. George did a good deal of reading and thinking. He also spent much time with his wife, frequently taking little walks or rides; and with his children, taking them swimming or sailing, or helping to make or float toy boats. Moreover, there was the frequent interruption of friends from San Francisco. But the matter of chief importance was the Fourth of July speech.

It was the custom for the city of San Francisco to have a military parade and civic exercises in celebration of the nation's birthday, and towards the middle of June Henry George was notified that he had been chosen to be “the Orator of the Day” for that year. He had been expecting this; had, in fact, begun work on his oration—“The American Republic.”

The afternoon of the Fourth was sultry, but the old California Theatre where the exercises were held was crowded. First came the reading of the Declaration of Independence and the poem of the day, and then the oration. There had been a miscalculation as to length, and the speech was long for the exercises. Nevertheless the effort—the greatest that Henry George had yet made—was well sustained.

It did not take him long to come to the consuming thought that would not give him rest.

"We are yet laying the foundations of empire, while stronger run the currents of change and mightier are the forces that marshal and meet. . . . For let us not disguise it—republican government is yet but an experiment. That it has worked well so far, determines nothing. That republican institutions would work well under the social conditions of the youth of the Republic—cheap land, high wages and little distinction between rich and poor—there was never any doubt, for they were working well before. . . . The doubt about republican institutions is as to whether they will work when population becomes dense, wages low, and a great gulf separates rich and poor. Can we speak of it as a doubt? Nothing in political philosophy can be clearer than that under such conditions republican government must break down. . . .

"Six hundred liveried retainers followed the great Earl of Warwick to Parliament; but in this young State there is already a simple citizen¹ who could discharge any one of thousands of men from their employment, who controls 2,200 miles of railroad and telegraph, and millions of acres of land; and has the power of levying toll on traffic and travel over an area twice that of the original thirteen States. Warwick was a king-maker. Would it add to the real power of our simple citizen were we to dub him an earl? . . .

"Here is the test: whatever conduces to the equal and inalienable rights of men is good—let us preserve it. Whatever denies or interferes with those equal rights is bad—let us sweep it away. . . .

"Wealth in itself is a good, not an evil; but wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, corrupts on one side, and degrades on the other. No chain is stronger than its weakest link, and the ultimate condition of any people must be the condition of its lowest class. If the

¹ Leland Stanford.

low are not brought up, the high must be brought down. In the long run, no nation can be freer than its most oppressed, richer than its poorest, wiser than its most ignorant. This is the fiat of the eternal justice that rules the world. It stands forth on every page of history. It is what the Sphinx says to us as she sitteth in desert sand, while the winged bulls of Nineveh bear her witness!"

The oration closed with a majestic apostrophe to Liberty, that became the key-note, indeed, with but few changes, the very language of "Progress and Poverty."

"They who look upon Liberty as having accomplished her mission, when she has abolished hereditary privileges and given men the ballot, who think of her as having no further relations to the every-day affairs of life, have not seen her real grandeur—to them the poets who have sung of her must seem rhapsodists, and her martyrs fools! As the sun is the lord of life, as well as of light; as his beams not merely pierce the clouds, but support all growth, supply all motion, and call forth from what would otherwise be a cold and inert mass, all the infinite diversities of being and beauty, so is Liberty to mankind. It is not for an abstraction that men have toiled and died; that in every age the witnesses of Liberty have stood forth, and the martyrs of Liberty have suffered. It was for more than this that matrons handed the Queen Anne musket from its rest, and that maids bid their lovers go to death!

"We speak of Liberty as one thing, and of virtue, wealth, knowledge, invention, national strength and national independence as other things. But, of all these, Liberty is the source, the mother, the necessary condition. She is to virtue what light is to colour, to wealth what sunshine is to grain; to knowledge what eyes are to the sight. She is the genius of invention, the brawn

¹ "Progress and Poverty," Book X, Chap. v
(Memorial Edition, pp. 543-545).

of national strength, the spirit of national independence! Where Liberty rises, there virtue grows, wealth increases, knowledge expands, invention multiplies human powers, and in strength and spirit the freer nation rises among her neighbours as Saul amid his brethren—taller and fairer. Where Liberty sinks, there virtue fades, wealth diminishes, knowledge is forgotten, invention ceases, and empires once mighty in arms and arts become a helpless prey to freer barbarians!

“Only in broken gleams and partial light has the sun of Liberty yet beamed among men, yet all progress hath she called forth.

“Liberty came to a race of slaves crouching under Egyptian whips, and led them forth from the House of Bondage. She hardened them in the desert and made of them a race of conquerors. The free spirit of the Mosaic law took their thinkers up to heights where they beheld the unity of God, and inspired their poets with strains that yet phrase the highest exaltations of thought. Liberty dawned on the Phœnician Coast, and ships passed the Pillars of Hercules to plough the unknown sea. She broke in partial light on Greece, and marble grew to shapes of ideal beauty, words became the instruments of subtlest thought, and against the scanty militia of free cities the countless hosts of the Great King broke like surges against a rock. She cast her beams on the four-acre farms of Italian husbandmen, and born of her strength a power came forth that conquered the world! She glinted from shields of German warriors, and Augustus wept his legions. Out of the night that followed her eclipse, her slanting rays fell again on free cities, and a lost learning revived, modern civilisation began, a new world was unveiled; and as Liberty grew so grew art, wealth, power, knowledge and refinement. In the history of every nation we may read the same truth. It was the strength born of Magna Charta that won Crecy and Agincourt. It was the revival of Liberty from the despotism of the Tudors that glorified the Elizabethan age. It was the spirit that brought a crowned tyrant to the block that planted here

the seed of a mighty tree. It was the energy of ancient freedom that, the moment it had gained unity, made Spain the mightiest power of the world, only to fall to the lowest depth of weakness when tyranny succeeded Liberty. See, in France, all intellectual vigour dying under the tyranny of the seventeenth century to revive in splendour as Liberty awoke in the eighteenth, and on the enfranchisement of the French peasants in the Great Revolution, basing the wonderful strength that has in our time laughed at disaster.

“Who is Liberty that we should doubt her; that we should set bounds to her, and say, ‘Thus far shall thou come and no further!’ Is she not peace? is she not prosperity? is she not progress? nay, is she not the goal towards which all progress strives?”

“Not here; but yet she cometh! Saints have seen her in their visions; seers have seen her in their trance. To heroes has she spoken, and their hearts were strong; to martyrs, and the flames were cool!

“She is not here, but yet she cometh. Lo! her feet are on the mountains—the call of her clarion rings on every breeze; the banners of her dawning fret the sky! Who will hear her as she calleth; who will bid her come and welcome? Who will turn to her? who will speak for her? who will stand for her while she yet hath need?”

Who would stand for liberty, indeed! *his* kind of Liberty? There was general wonderment at the orator’s fine imagery and eloquent periods, but who comprehended his philosophy? The stage was crowded with men distinguished in the city and the State. Some of these were conspicuous representatives of the institutions which Mr. George more than vaguely threatened, though they made no sign. The great audience applauded the flowing and lofty language, but who save the personal friends scattered about understood that the speaker was striking at the castle of vested rights—private property in land? As

for the press, its attitude was not very encouraging, the friendliest paper, the "Examiner," saying faintly that "the oration was good throughout and full of food for thought," while the most hostile, the "News Letter," observed that the "gas measurer . . . kindly spoke for several hours on the Goddess of Liberty and other school-reader topics." Privately the newspaper men expressed surprise that "Harry George" could write so well.

Shortly following this event the family moved back to San Francisco, taking a house on Second Street, Rincon Hill, just around the corner from the former Harrison Street residence. The new house was dusty in the dry season from the heavy travel through the street to and from the wharves, but it was comfortable withal, and the rent low—an important consideration in that period of general depression.

Mr. George was in the troubles of moving when suddenly he found himself pitchforked into politics. In his diary he noted on August 20, "Found I had been nominated for the State Senate at Charter Oak Hall," an independent political organisation. Five days later the diary showed that he was "nominated last night by Anti-Coolies," a workingmen's anti-Chinese movement. But he was not to be drawn from his seclusion just then, and on Sunday, August 26, he made this entry: "John M. Days at house in morning. Went to office and wrote declination to Anti-Coolies. Home and wrote declination to Charter Oak, and sent it to Days by Harry."

And so for the first time in a number of years, Henry George was a spectator of political affairs, and there is little to note up to election day early in September other than that he stayed at home and read, among the books being German history, Code of Civil Procedure and Knight's "History of England."