

CHAPTER X

“PROGRESS AND POVERTY” FINISHED.

1878-1879.

AGE, 39-40.

ENTERING his library, one might witness the author, slightly inclined over an ample table in the centre of the room, writing on his book. Perhaps wearing a little house jacket, he sat, one hand holding the paper, the other moving a soft gold pen over it. And as he roused at sound of your entrance and turned and sank back, with one arm still on the table, the other thrown over the back of his chair, he raised a countenance not to be forgotten—a slight smile on the lips, a glow in the cheeks, tense thought in the brow and a gleam in the deep-blue eyes that looked straight through and beyond you, as if to rest on the world of visions of the pure in heart.

It was in a house on First Street,¹ near Harrison, to which the restless family now moved, that the main work on “Progress and Poverty” took place and the book was finished. For a while there was no parlour carpet, because the family could not afford to buy one, but the library, which was the workroom, was sufficiently furnished and was large and light and comfortable, and had three windows looking out on the bay.

Mr. George by gradual accumulation had acquired a

¹ No. 417 First Street.

library of nearly eight hundred volumes. They were his chief possessions in the world. They related to political economy, history and biography, poetry, philosophy, the sciences in popular form, and travels and discovery, with but few works of fiction. But these were only a few of the books he used, for he drew from the four public libraries of the city—the Odd Fellows, Mercantile, Mechanics and Free—and from the State Library at Sacramento; while he also had access to the books of his friends and acquaintances. Dating from the time of his leaving the "Evening Post," he had applied himself assiduously to reading, adding to a natural taste the sense of duty of storing his mind. His method or order of reading suited the needs of his work or the bent of his fancy, though he most frequently read poetry in the mornings before beginning labour, and after the midday and evening meals. He had not what would be called a musical taste or "ear," yet he said that all poetry that appealed to him—and it took a wide range—set itself to music in his mind.

He read mostly reclining, a pile of books drawn up beside him. He devoted himself with care to the reading of the standard works of political economy, yet freely confessed that of all books, these gave him the greatest labour. At night, if wakeful, he would ask his wife to, or would himself, take up some solid work, preferably some law treatise, which would invariably send him to sleep. He would frequently mark passages, and at times make notes; but he could generally with little difficulty turn to whatever in his past reading would serve an argument, fit as an illustration or adorn his diction. To most of his friends he seemed a browser rather than a deep reader, because he spent so little time on a book: and in truth, to use his own expression, he read "at" most books, not through

them. Yet in this dipping he had the art of culling the particular parts that were useful to the purposes of his mind.

He needed eight hours sleep nightly, and what he lost at one time he would make up at another. He arose about seven, took a cold bath and dressed, careless about his outer clothes but invariably donning fresh linen. After breakfast he smoked a cigar and looked over the newspaper, then he stretched out on his lounge and read poetry for perhaps half an hour. And lying on his back he would do most of his thinking; but he also thought as he walked and smoked. He seldom sat in his chair except to write.

As he wrote much by inspiration, especially on the more elevated parts of his book, he could not always work at a set time or continuously. When his mind would not act to his suiting he would lie down and read, or go sailing or visit friends. To the casual observer his brain must have seemed intermittent in its operation; whereas, there really was an unconscious, or half conscious, cerebration when all the faculties seemed wholly occupied with outward trifles, for after such diversion he could write freely on the point that before was confused.

His writing, therefore, he did at any hour—early or late—suing the state of his mind. Sometimes it fell in the middle of the night, when sleep was coy and thought surged. Brilliant passages of his book came in these hours, as by voluntary gift, and his pen ran rapidly over the paper. The analytical sections he wrote slowly and with labour, since this could not be dashed off, but required thought in conception, thought in construction, thought in the use of every word. Throughout the work he applied himself without saving, and if genius is the art of taking pains, his application bespoke consummate genius.

First came the rough drafting, in which he used a sys-

tem of simple marks to represent the smaller common words. Numerous revisions and re-writings followed for sense, arrangement and diction, the requirements of the latter being clearness and simplicity, with a preference for short, Saxon words. Over and over again he wrote, arranged, expanded, contracted, smoothed and polished, for his motto was, "What makes easy reading is hard writing." When finished, the matter was submitted to the criticism of his friends, and strengthened wherever, to his view, they could find weak spots, so that eventually—in the preface to the fourth edition of the book—he was enabled to say that he "had yet to see an objection not answered in advance in the book itself." Indeed, so unremitting was his toil that it might almost be said that the labour of writing was with him finished only when the book was printed and beyond further work.

Careless about his personal appearance, the greatest neatness distinguished his manuscript. He wrote on sermon paper, for the most part in dark blue ink, with a straight margin on the left-hand side. The words, in large, clear letters, were separated by wide, even spaces. The manuscript when finished was inviting and easy to read. The influence of his father's plain, clear, direct manner of thinking and speaking and of his mother's fine nature and lofty language showed in his style so early that he may be said to have been a born writer. And when he sat down to write his book, common sense and melody mingled harmoniously as the events of his restless life rolled before him like a varied panorama—a panorama to which books brought the parallels and contrasts of shade and colour. As without knowledge of the schools, he had read the suggestions of scenes about him, drawn his own deductions and constructed his own philosophy; so without training in the rules of style, he followed the

quick, nervous action, and force and cadence of his own mind. And type and illustration came as a natural consequence from life around—no man too common, no incident too trivial, to make a picture or grace an argument.

Points to treat and forms of speech to use were frequently set down, mostly on loose sheets, though two small blank books exist containing such notes, among them being two early ideas for a title—one of them, "Must Progress Bring Poverty?" another "Wealth and Want."

The eldest son had reached the top grade in the grammar school, which was thought to be enough schooling, so that he was taken away and became amanuensis to his father, at the same time studying shorthand with the view of taking dictations and in other ways becoming more helpful. Mrs. George gave every encouragement in her power and verified fair with marked copies of the manuscript. It was perhaps with this period taking chief place in his memory that Dr. Taylor, after his friend's death, said:

"Surely, never were man and woman closer to each other in affection and sympathy than were Mr. and Mrs. George—companions ever till death stepped between them; companions, too, of the noble sort that breasted together not only their own sufferings, but the sufferings of the world around them."

And so, too, the relations between Henry George and his friends were extremely warm; perhaps singular. As if in pursuance of his father's early injunction, to "make friends and use them," few men with close friends ever drew more from them. No matter how they differed among themselves, to him each offered earnest devotion. None of them was what could be called a political economist; yet for that matter George held that political

economy is the one science that cannot be safely left to specialists, the one science which the ordinary man, without tools, apparatus or special learning, may most easily study.¹ At the beginning, at least, it was not so much the principles he proclaimed as it was two personal qualities he possessed that drew his chosen friends closely about him and commanded their strong support. One of these qualities was courage—described as “his sublime courage in attacking the most gigantic vested right in the world.” The other quality was sympathy.

This quality of sympathy was, perhaps, Henry George's predominant trait of character. It had made him heart-sick at sight of the want and suffering in the great city; it had impelled him to search for the cause and the cure. In the bonds of friendship it carried him into the other's thoughts and feelings. Intuitively he put himself into the other man's place and looked at the world through those other eyes. Rarely demonstrative in such circumstances, he did not speak of his sympathy, but it was as plain as if the word was written on his face. He had not studied man from the closet. He had all his rugged life been at school with humanity, and to him the type of humanity was the common man. Civilisation built up from the common man, flourished as the common man flourished, decayed and fell with the common man's loss of independence. He himself had climbed out on swaying yards like the commonest man, carried his blankets as a prospector and common miner, felt something of the hardships of farming, tramped dusty roads as a pedlar, had every experience as a printer, and suffered the physical and mental tortures of hunger. Learning and pride and power and

¹ This idea is expressed in all of his books, but most explicitly and fully in “The Science of Political Economy,” General Introduction, p. xxxv.

tradition and precedent went for little with him; the human heart, the moral purpose, became the core thing. Towards him, from this very quality of sympathy, each friend—blacksmith or lawyer, man of little reading or lover of *belles-lettres*—had a singular consciousness of nearness—a feeling that this man could see *what* he himself saw and *as* he saw—could understand *his* labours, *his* sufferings, *his* aspirations. Nor was this condition peculiar to the “Progress and Poverty” period. It developed at that time and continued to Henry George’s death. On the part of most of the men with whom he came in close contact, in California and in other parts of the world, there were feelings of attachment which if unspoken, were deep, solemn and lasting.

Among the friends closest to him during the writing of “Progress and Poverty” and whose criticism or counsel he asked in one particular or another were Assemblyman James V. Coffey, Ex-Assemblyman James G. Maguire, William Hinton and his oldest son, Charles; State Senator P. J. Donovan and Ex-State Senator John M. Days, John Swett, Principal of the Girl’s High School; A. S. Hallidie, Regent of the University of California and Trustee of the Free Public Library; James McClatchy of the “Sacramento Bee”; H. H. Moore, the bookseller; and Dr. Edward R. Taylor. Two of them were Englishmen born, the others came from various parts of the United States. Not one of them had received a finished education in the European sense. All were positive, aggressive, independent men, representing distinct opinions, tastes and habits of life. Each had made his way in the community chiefly by the force of his own nature. George made requisition upon these different men for different purposes. But Taylor was the mainstay—the only man who read all of the manuscript and subsequently all of the proofs.

Edward R. Taylor had worked as purser on a Sacramento steamboat, set type and written for a newspaper, studied and practised medicine, served as private secretary to Governor Haight, and afterwards studied law and entered on a profitable practice in partnership with him. With it all he had found time to attain many of the refinements of life, had read carefully and widely, made himself master of polished verse and a competent judge of the fine arts. To him George made constant reference, and he responded with tireless zeal. After his friend's death, Taylor said:¹

“When ‘Progress and Poverty’ was in process, as on its completion, it occurred to me that here was one of those books that every now and again spring forth to show men what man can do when his noblest emotions combine with his highest mentality to produce something for the permanent betterment of our common humanity; that here was a burning message that would call the attention of men to the land question as it had never been called before; and that whether the message was

¹The following lines were written by Mr. George in a copy of the original edition of “Progress and Poverty” that he gave to Dr. Taylor:

TO

E. R. Taylor

this copy of a book which he knows from the first
and in the production of which

he has aided not only as compositor, proof-reader, critic and poet,
but still more

by the clearness of his judgment, the warmth of his sympathy, the
support of his friendship and the stimulation of his faith

is

on the day when the long, hard struggle breaks into the first success,
presented by Henry George

in token of feelings which it could but poorly
symbolise were it covered with gold and crusted with
diamonds.

San Francisco, Oct. 20, 1879.

embodied in an argument of absolute irrefragability or not, it was yet one that would stir the hearts of millions.

“And similarly, the author of the book never for a moment doubted that his travail had resulted in a great deliverance; and he firmly believed (this faith never once faltering up to the moment of his death) that he had pointed out the one true road for burdened humanity to follow.”

During the work on “Progress and Poverty” the author gave many proofs of his preoccupation. This appeared mostly at table. He was impatient of service and was willing to commence and finish with anything, so long as he did not have to wait. One day at lunch he sat down in a dreamy way, drew a dish of cold stewed tomatoes towards him and helped himself bountifully, for he was very fond of them. By the time he had eaten them the other edibles were served. Presently his eyes fell upon the tomatoes at the farther end of the table. “Well,” he said with some asperity, “am I not to have any tomatoes? Don’t you know I like them?” At another time one of the boys on a Sunday evening went to the cupboard and took out a cake with the intention of eating some, for the family was accustomed on that day to take an early dinner. He had the knife in hand and was about to cut a slice, when he was caught in the act, so to speak, by his father’s entrance. Instead of reproving him, as the boy half expected, the father took the knife, cut himself a slice and sat down to eat it, all the time in a reverie, holding the knife and forgetful of the boy. When that was eaten, he cut himself another and afterwards a third slice, still holding the knife. It was only then that he noticed that his son was not eating. “Here, have a piece,” he said. “It is good.”

As he was in these respects, so was he in others. While

contending with the loftiest problems possible for the human mind and writing a book that should verily stir the hearts of millions, there was no more personal show or pretence in or out of his workroom than if he were engaged daily in filling out government weather reports. Thoughtless of dress, and often abstracted, he was unconventional in speech, at times even to lapses in syntax. There was an utter absence of anything that was stiff or pompous. He could work with his boys over a toy boat in the yard and then go and help sail it; unbend to his older girl and talk doll and party until her eyes shone; sing and coo to the new baby and call her "sunshine"; discuss lighter literature with his wife as if it shaped his daily course; defer to a visitor who came to break bread as with an absorbed purpose to learn; lead in the merriment of a mild practical joke among his friends and laugh with the ring and cheer of boyhood over a comical story. There were times in the family when the strain of following the long examination and argument and of watching the multitude of details told on the strong, quick, high-strung nature with bursts of impatience; but they passed as April showers.

Though writing a book that was quickly to become famous, he could not absolutely foresee this. He believed he was writing the truth and this urged him on, yet constantly came the disheartening thought, how hopeless the effort, how futile the sacrifice; for what could avail against such stupendous odds? And while waged this inner conflict, there was outward stress and struggle, debts and difficulties. At one time just for a little ready money he pawned his watch. But despite all, he pressed on, until by the middle of March, 1879, almost a year and a half after he first sat down to it, the task was done. "On the night in which I finished the final chapter of 'Progress

and Poverty,'” he subsequently wrote,¹ “I felt that the talent intrusted to me had been accounted for—felt more fully satisfied, more deeply grateful than if all the kingdoms of the earth had been laid at my feet.”

The full meaning of these words, and what reveals the living fire that burned in the breast of him who uttered them and the religious zeal that possessed and drove him on, is to be found in a postscript to a letter he wrote four years later (February 1, 1883) to Rev. Thomas Dawson of Glencree, Ireland—a letter which in a former chapter we have quoted in part.² Written in his own hand, it was attached to a letter he had dictated to his eldest son and was never seen by any eye but Father Dawson's until after death had claimed its author.

“There is something else I wanted to say to you that I can only write with my own hand. Don't be disturbed because I am not a Catholic. In some things your Church is very attractive to me; in others it is repellent. But I care nothing for creeds. It seems to me that in any church or out of them one may serve the Master, and this also that faith that is the soul of your Church holds. And in my way, in the line that duty has seemed to call me, that I have tried to do. Because you are not only my friend, but a priest and a religious, I shall say something that I don't like to speak of—that I never before have told to any one. Once, in daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call—give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true. It was that that impelled me to write ‘Progress and Poverty’ and that sustained me when else I should have failed. And when I had finished the last page, in the dead of night, when I was entirely

¹ Preface to “The Science of Political Economy.” ² Page 193.

alone, I flung myself on my knees and wept like a child. The rest, was in the Master's hands. That is a feeling that has never left me; that is constantly with me. And it has led me up and up. It has made me a better and a purer man. It has been to me a religion, strong and deep, though vague—a religion of which I never like to speak, or make any outward manifestation, but yet that I try to follow. Believe this, my dear father, that if it be God's will I should be a Catholic, he will call me to it. But in many different forms and in many different ways men may serve Him.

“Please consider this letter to *yourself alone*. I have only said this much to you because you wrote my wife hoping I would become a Catholic. Do not disturb yourself about that. I do not wish you not to be a Catholic. Inside of the Catholic Church and out of it; inside of all denominations and creeds and outside of them all there is work to do. Each in the station to which he has been called, let us do what is set us, and we shall not clash. From various instruments, set to different keys, comes the grand harmony. And when you remember me in your prayers, which I trust you sometimes will, do not ask that I shall be this or that, but only for grace, and guidance, and strength to the end.”