CHAPTER XII

INSPECTOR OF METERS

IT IS ALL in a lifetime, and I have seen too much to think I can certainly tell what is good and what is evil fortune," Henry George wrote to his friend John Swinton of the *New York Sun* the day following his loss of the *Post*.[1]

Thus he took another defeat philosophically. Analyzing the event a few days later in another letter to Swinton, he explained his situation in San Francisco in these words:

> They look on me as a pestilential agrarian and communist and will avoid what they call my hobbies. But though they do not know it, the very aggressiveness and radicalism of the *Post* was its strength. In making a paper that will not affect gunny bags, they will kill it as you will in time see.... I ran the *Post* for four years lacking a week, and successfully. If I never did anything more I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have perceptibly affected public thought and planted ideas which will some day bloom into action. As for being depressed I am not—twenty-four hours are enough for me to cry over spilt milk.[2]

Now his sponsorship of William S. Irwin, newly elected Governor of California, fortunately stood him in good stead. Governor Irwin appointed the erstwhile editor as State Inspector of Gas Meters, monotonous work for a man of his intellect but welcome because it paid (in fees) a modest salary and provided some leisure. Four months after he took up this work George wrote to his father that "I have done writing enough and now I propose to do a little speaking." He had had his fill of the newspaper business for the time, he wrote, and had started the study of law "to employ my leisure in that way as much as I can, and before my term is out get admitted to the bar."

He wrote of his home life:

There has been no period when I felt so contented.[3] In all this Pacific coast, yes in all the United States, there is no happier home than mine. It is now nearly fifteen years since Annie and I were married, and we are more lovers today than we were then, while our three children are nothing but pleasure and pride.

The boys in school nickname Harry (Henry, Jr.) "The Orator." They are always glad to hear him speak. His last piece is Mark Anthony's address over the dead body of Caesar.* Dick recited for me the other night almost the whole of "Horatius," and that is a very long poem; while little Jen, not to be outdone, recited "The Night Before Christmas"... the boys know more of Shakespeare than I did at twenty-five and are fast picking up, without any strain, a knowledge of history, etc.... If it were not for the embarrassed way in which I got out of the *Post* there would be no difficulty about our coming to the Centennial exposition in Philadelphia in style.[4] But I can see my way clear now and don't propose to go in debt again. ... Now I want to concentrate, and study and think, and then when I get ready I will come permanently before the public again in some way or other.[5]

As inspector of gas meters he was obliged to travel about the state, where he made interesting contacts and was able to study local conditions. It not only gave him time to read law but also to do some writing. He wrote articles for the *Sacramento Bee*, took an active interest in the doings of the Legislature, and entered vigorously into the Tilden-Hayes presidential campaign.

On the night of August 15, 1876, he made his first political speech in behalf of Tilden, whom he believed to be a free trader. Delivered at Dashaway Hall under the auspices of the Tilden and Hendricks Club of San Francisco, the speech was not a political harangue but a carefully prepared study of economic conditions. He considered the Presidential contest to be "a solemn, momentous inquiry, demanding from each voter a conscientious judgment."[6] Reading his manuscript slowly and deliberately, he warned, "The Federal tax-gatherer is everywhere. In each exchange by which labor is converted into commodities, there he is, standing between buyer and seller to take his toll."[7] At one point he sketched vividly the social conditions of the period:

* He won only second prize, however; his classmate, David Warfield, who in time was to become a great dramatic star, won first.—Editor.

See seventy thousand men out of work in the Pennsylvania coal fields; fifty thousand laborers asking for bread in the City of New York; the almshouses of Massachusetts crowded to repletion in the summertime; 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 pure symptoms of that leprosy of nations, chronic pauperism.... What can any change of men avail so long as the policy which is the primary cause of these evils is unchanged? [8]

This address was so successful that it was printed and used as a campaign pamphlet. In spite of George's lack of oratorical training he was invited to "stump" the state for the Democrats. This gave him a reputation as a speaker and he was asked to deliver the final address of the campaign.

"Whether I go into politics, into the law or into the newspaper business," he wrote his mother, "I do not intend to rest here; but to go ahead step by step.... 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." [9]

There had been no chair of political economy at the University of California, and when plans were made to establish one, Henry George, who had proved his threefold power as original thinker, writer, and speaker, was suggested for the place. His familiarity with economics as evinced in "Our Land and Land Policy" and his long record of thoughtful editorials won him an invitation to deliver several lectures at Berkeley before the students and faculty.

A college professorship, as George confided to his wife, was one of his ambitions. And so he took much care in the preparation of the first lecture, "The Study of Political Economy." He made no attempt to expound his own theories on how the unequal distribution of wealth might be rectified but tried merely to show the vital importance of this branch of learning which "concerns itself with matters which among us occupy more than nine tenths of human effort, and perhaps nine tenths of human thought." He defined economics in this wise, compressing much of his philosophy into a few sentences:

In its province are included all that relates to the wages of labor 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 proportion in which that wealth will be distributed between individuals. Though not the science of government, it is essential to the science of government. . . . If you trace out the laws of 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.

And you will see the remedies. Not in wild dreams of red destruction nor weak projects for putting them in leading-strings to a brainless abstraction called the state, but in simple measures sanctioned by justice. You will see in light the great remedy, in freedom the great solvent. 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 generalizations of political economy.[10]

The students appeared to like the lecture. But the faculty gave it a politely chilly reception which made George suspect that he would not be invited to appear at the University of California again. And, to his deep regret, he was not invited.[11]

Perhaps this was because of the following conscious digression, in which George expounded much of his theory of education:

For the study of political economy you need no special knowledge, no extensive library, no costly laboratory. You do not even need textbooks or 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. . . . All this array of professors, all this paraphernalia of learning cannot educate a man. 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 con-

temptible, all the more in the way of real progress, because they pass, with themselves and others, as educated men. . . .[12]

Whatever reason the University Board may have had for not asking George to deliver a second lecture, his friendships with President John LeConte and his brother, Professor Joseph LeConte, the physicist, Professor William Swinton (brother of John Swinton), authority in the field of belles-lettres, and others among the faculty were in no way diminished.

Of course, he did not get the appointment to the new chair of political economy.

A few months after the Berkeley lecture George was chosen by citizens of San Francisco to be the principal orator at the Fourth of July celebration held in the California Theater. The hall was crowded. He delivered a long and scholarly address which was prophetic in the sense that it antedated by many years the League of Nations and even the United Nations. At one point he asked, "Is it too soon to hope . . . that it may be the mission of this Republic to unite all the nations of English speech, whether they grow beneath the Northern Star or Southern Cross, in a league which, by insuring justice, promoting peace, and liberating commerce, will be the forerunner of a world-wide federation that will make war the possibility of a past age, and turn to works of usefulness the enormous forces now dedicated to destruction?"[13]

Ending with an apostrophe to liberty, this oration called forth wonder from his friends and commendation from most of the newspapers, although the *News Letter* stated that the "gas measurer . . . kindly spoke for several hours on the Goddess of Liberty and other school reader topics."[14]

And now the "gas measurer" declined the nomination for state senator offered by a group of workingmen who were strongly anti-Chinese. Instead, he retired from public life for a time and after the day's diminishing meter inspections were done, read history and wrote an inquiry into recurring industrial depressions. When the essay was finished he read it to his friend Dr. Taylor.

Edward Robeson Taylor, one year older than George, had served as purser on a Sacramento River steamboat, had set type, and had written for a newspaper. Later he became private secretary to Governor Haight, and was now the former Governor's law partner. (Taylor was a doctor of medicine as

well as a doctor of laws. After the San Francisco earthquake of 1896 he served a term as mayor and later became dean of the University of California Law School.)

When Dr. Taylor heard this latest product of Henry George's economic thinking—this article on progress and its shadow, want—he was greatly impressed and urged the author not to give it to a magazine but to expand it into the book which another friend, James McClatchy, editor of the *Sacramento Bee*, had been urging him to write. George himself had realized, after finishing "Our Land and Land Policy" in 1871, that someday he would have to write a longer work to give the fullest expression to his views. Now, in this lull in the pressure of his personal concerns, after six years of newspaper work and study of public affairs, at last the time had come to write that book.

The entry in his diary for September 18, 1877, read: "Commenced 'Progress and Poverty.'"