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TOM L. JOHNSON: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

By Hon. Henry George, Jr.

HAD Caesar not decided to cross the River Rubicon, doubtless the whole course of subsequent history would have been changed.

Had King Charles's warship not turned back the little vessel that was about to carry the obscure Oliver Cromwell from the country of his birth but of religious intolerance, to the new America where he might live and worship as he pleased, that sovereign might have died a natural death with his head on his shoulders, and the mighty trend of events in England have taken an entirely different course.

Had not the brilliant, reckless, worldly Leo Tolstoi had his intense sympathies arrested by a few individual cases of brutalizing poverty in the sea of misery surging around the Imperial splendors of the ancient Russian capital, Moscow, humanity might not have been blessed with the glory of that peerless latter-day moralist and seer.

And so it seems that out of accidents come big results to the world. So, at any rate, we may say of a great man of our own times, of our own blood, of our own nation, who has just closed the final chapter of his life—Tom Loftin Johnson.

For of him it may be said that had he not taken a railroad journey on a certain day; or, taking that journey, had he not been offered a certain book by the train newsboy; or had the book so offered been any other than the one that was offered—the whole course of his life might have been changed. He might then have died at last at an advanced age, one of the rich of the earth, but without having felt its real love—rather felt the hatred of his generation, which is so often the penalty of being a Prince of Privilege. Instead, he died at the comparatively early age of fifty-seven, physically a wreck, with but a small part of his former fortune, seemingly defeated in all his great political efforts, his most cherished hopes destroyed, and yet victor over all. His death consecrated the struggles of his life. His principles received new strength and vigor as the voice that uttered them became forever still. The spirit of the man became enshrined in the hearts of those who had hailed him as their army leader, to be passed on to posterity and be used by them as a slogan in the prodigious war against privilege.

Tom L. Johnson was about thirty years old when he took this railroad journey and

bought from a train newsboy a cheap paper-covered copy of a book called *Social Problems*. Of the author of the book, Henry George, he had never before heard. What wonder? Johnson was not a book student. George had come out of the West with a book called *Progress and Poverty*. These two books, *Progress and Poverty* and *Social Problems*, were attracting wide attention. Although treating of the science of political economy, their style was stripped of technical and dry-as-dust terminology and statement. They offered essential principles in simple, vivid language. They pulsed with sympathy and meaning for the unschooled.

For political economy really deals with the nature of wealth and the natural laws of its production and distribution. Hitherto, however, it has not been treated as a science, but as a loose, confused, disconnected kind of teaching, that gives countenance to privileges by which the few rob the many. In George's pages political economy is hailed as a science—a science made up of natural laws; a science that proclaims equal rights. Political economy there reveals the unequal distribution of wealth as the cause of enormous fortunes on the one hand and of vast and deepening poverty on the other. It charges certain forms of privilege, such as land monopoly, public franchise monopoly, and tariff monopoly, with the production of this unequal distribution.

Tom L. Johnson found that this applied with peculiar force to his own case. He was a monopolist. Yet the plea for social justice appealed to his mind and his heart. He pushed deeper into the George philosophy.

At that very time Johnson was on his way to make the sale of a street railroad patent. He was a large and rapidly rising figure in the world of street railroad affairs in the middle western cities. He had come up out of poverty with little or no schooling. Yet he had an extraordinary inventive and managing ability. This was backed by an unusual adaptability, a huge capacity for work and an iron constitution, a joyous, sanguine temperament, an audacity tempered by wisdom, and a personal appearance and magnetism that vanquished where his natural force did not beat down opposition.

He was born on a Kentucky plantation, of a line of slaveowners. One of these was the distinguished Richard M. Johnson, Vice President of the United States in 1837. Tom Johnson's father was Albert W. Johnson. When the Civil War opened Albert Johnson enlisted on the Southern side. Tom Johnson's mother was a woman of unusual strength of character. She would have developed large executive abilities had her lines been so cast. As it was, she followed the Southern army in which her husband fought. She took her three children with her. They were three boys, Tom, Will and Albert.

The family emerged from the war utterly broken in fortune. Colonel Albert W. Johnson became superintendent of a street railroad in the city of Louisville, Kentucky.

Tom became office boy. His business was to run errands, sweep out, and roll change into packages. Beginning thus at the bottom, he worked up through all the departments of a system then about to start on a great development with the introduction of cable power and later of electricity. He not only kept abreast of the newest ideas, but went ahead of them. He adopted, improved and independently invented.

From Louisville he went to Indianapolis, Indiana. There he bought a moribund suburban road with a little cash, some notes and a mortgage. The cash came from the sale of one of his inventions. His father and brothers were with him in this transaction. When, a few years later, this road was sold, Tom obtained by far the largest share of the selling price, which was said to have been a million dollars. Thence the Johnsons went to Cleveland, Ohio, and subsequently to Brooklyn, New York; Detroit, Michigan; and other places.

Tom Johnson had in the course of things invented a girder rail to take the place of the strip of steel rail fastened to a wooden girder, which quickly rotted. His invention made rail and girder one solid steel piece. These rails came into general use. Five-sixths of the street rails used at one period in this country were his. Contracts for the manufacture of these rails were made with various companies, until a company named after Johnson was established at Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The president of the Johnson Company was Mr. Arthur Moxham, a brilliantly able and versatile Englishman. The Johnson Company later established larger works on Lake Erie at Loraine, Ohio. Subsequently both plants were merged in the United States Steel Corporation—the Steel Trust. But Tom Johnson had withdrawn when that occurred. — In these various ways Tom Johnson was marching on to fortune. Everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. At one time it was believed he was worth \$5,000,000. Before him lay opportunities that would, had he availed himself of them, within a few years have made him a multi-millionaire.

But he had conceived a great change of heart. Reading the book, *Social Problems*, and later the book, *Progress and Poverty*, had opened his eyes to the whole question of the production and distribution of wealth. He saw that some part of his riches was coming from production. But he saw just as clearly that the greater part of them was proceeding from the powers of monopoly which he possessed—street railroad monopoly, tariff monopoly, and land monopoly. He saw that these monopolies controlled the bounties of nature or otherwise enabled their possessors to rob the masses of men of a large part of the produce of their labor. He resolved to stop participating in this. He resolved to stop making money in this way. He resolved to turn his mind and soul against this order of things; to espouse, instead, the philosophy

and help spread the ideas of the man whose books had opened to him a new and higher plane of life.

While he brooded over this change he was in the midst of the development of a street railroad system in the city of Brooklyn. Henry George was at that time living there, and just then getting out a third book—*Protection or Free Trade?* Johnson called upon Henry George. His own account of that meeting was simple and direct. He said:

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The Life of Henry George, by Henry George, Jr., p. 457.

"I had looked forward with more intense interest to the meeting than I was aware of, for when I tried to speak in a manly way of what was in my heart, I was conscious of much emotion. I said that I should rather have it to say to my children that I had met Henry George and had entertained him under my own roof as my guest than be able to transmit to them any worldly blessing.

"I did not want to talk about myself. I did not go there for that. I went to talk to Mr. George about his cause; I wanted in some way to call it *my* cause, too. But he stretched out on a lounge and I sat in a chair, and I found myself telling him the story of my life.

"Then I said: 'Mr. George, your book on the tariff question t will soon be out. I want to help to do good with it. I want 200 copies to send to lawyers and clergymen in Cleveland.' I also said to him: 'I cannot write and I cannot speak. The least I can do is to make money with which to push our cause.'

"Mr. George answered: 'You do not know whether or not you can write; you have not tried. You do not know whether or not you can speak; you have not tried. Take an interest in political questions. It is well enough to make money, but the abilities that can make money can do other things, too.'"

t *Protection or Free Trade ?*

If Tom L. Johnson did not know himself then, he subsequently came to that knowledge. His life was too active until toward its close to lend itself to writing; but an autobiography which he dictated in the intervals most free from physical pain in the course of the year before his death, show a directness and brevity of statement, a clearness and exactness of thought, that indicated high potential literary qualities.

His public speaking powers, however, began to be called upon very soon under Henry George's influence, and from the first he revealed a remarkably terse and direct manner of statement which, coupled with a daring candor and a handsome,

open countenance and commanding figure, made him wonderfully attractive on the platform.

It was before a mixed audience in Cooper Union, New York, that he made one of his most effective speeches, or perhaps I should say replies; for his answer to a question from the audience was what attracted attention far and wide. He had delivered an address on the nature of monopoly and its abolition; and, as Henry George had always been accustomed to do, Johnson at the end announced himself as ready to answer relevant questions.

A man arose from the body of the audience and asked if he might put a personal question. Johnson assented. The man said: "Will you please tell this audience what your business is?"

In his sententious way, Johnson answered: "Monopolist."

The man then said: "Will you now please tell this audience how you reconcile your business as a monopolist with your lecture this evening against monopoly?"

To which came the quick response: "I don't reconcile them. I live under a majority government. The majority decrees that monopolies shall be permitted. Since monopolies exist in spite of me, I am going to get in the front line and grab all I can, and then out of my riches I propose to try to teach you fools how to destroy monopolies and establish equal rights!"

And later, when he was in Congress, Tom Johnson did the daring thing. Although a steel rail manufacturer, he moved, during tariff legislation, to put steel rails on the free list. This brought Mr. Dalzell of Pennsylvania, chief defender of the high duties on steel, to his feet. The Congressional Record shows this colloquy:

Mr. Dalzell: "Is the gentleman a party to the steel rail trust?"

Mr. Johnson of Ohio: "I am not; but whether I am or not would make no difference. Outside of this hall, as a steel manufacturer, I might be perfectly willing to enter a trust, but I will not defend trusts here. [Applause.] Now I would like to ask the gentleman a question. Does he deny the existence of the steel rail pool?"

Mr. Dalzell: "I do deny the existence of a steel rail trust."

Mr. Johnson of Ohio: "Well, you make no quibble on the word 'trust' or 'pool.' "

Mr. Dalzell: "There was a combination between the steel rail manufacturers."
[Applause on the Democratic side.]

Mr. Johnson of Ohio: "Go on, I will wait for you."

Mr. Dalzell: "There was a combination between certain steel rail men, which was broken up by the refusal of a large number of firms to go into it, and it fell of its own weight. There was no condition in it for keeping up prices, and as a matter of fact the prices continued to fall from the time of the formation of the trust until its termination. The prices of rails steadily fell all the time; and in addition to that—"

Mr. Johnson of Ohio: "Go on."

Mr. Dalzell: "A large proportion of the steel mills to-day are in the hands of receivers. The gentleman knows that to be a fact."

Mr. Johnson of Ohio: "But you deny that there is a 'pool'?"

Mr. Dalzell: "Yes, sir."

Mr. Johnson of Ohio: "Well, here is a copy of a contract with the Maryland Steel Company, which proves a steel rail pool's existence." | Laughter and applause on the Democratic side.]

But it was when he became Mayor of Cleveland, after two terms in Congress, that Tom L. Johnson began the supreme struggle of his life—a struggle that exceeded in resourcefulness, bitterness and duration any municipal conflict ever waged in this country, and which cost him his fortune, his political prestige and his life itself. Yet from this seeming utter failure will come the glory for his name. For in it he established with his life blood the foundation of the true democratic city.

His original purpose in running for the office of mayor was, as he announced during his campaign, to advance toward the single tax—to shift taxation from buildings and other improvements upon land to ground values—the value of land after excluding all improvements.

He had, while a member of Congress, served as chairman of a special committee to investigate taxation matters in the District of Columbia. There he had uncovered scandalous inequalities in assessment and taxation. Burdens he found heaped upon those who built and improved. The heaviest burdens were on the small storekeepers and the small home-owners. The wealthy land-owners, and particularly the great speculators, went with small burdens; some practically free. This stimulated

speculation in what all who lived in the national capital had to use—land, while it penalized the things that labor produced. Johnson's time in Congress was too short to effect any change in this regard in Washington, but as mayor of Cleveland he proposed first to obtain a just assessment of the land, and then to concentrate all local taxation upon that assessment.

This was the application of the single tax, or at least so much of it as was possible under the municipal laws. Henry George had written specifically toward the end of his *Protection or Free Trade!* that, while the greatest education respecting single-tax principles would occur through the general discussion of it as a substitute means of raising the national revenue, the application of the single tax would come locally; each municipality or county sending to the state government its quota of revenue raised from land values; and each state its quota to the national government at Washington.

In proposing to apply the tax to a municipality. Johnson was therefore beginning at the beginning for practical application; and in the hope of this great accomplishment, he selected the city of his adoption, Cleveland.

His election was a triumph, but in studying political conditions after taking the mayor's chair, he realized that the street railroad, the gas, the electric light and the other public-service corporations were in command of the council at the City Hall. They had a strong paid lobby there. Perhaps that fact was not a matter of surprise to him; for, as he often subsequently said, he himself had been on both sides of the street railroad fight. Until he had to fight them, however, he may not have realized the power of these public-street-using corporations and their lobbies. At any rate, he now saw that to make a start toward the single tax in Cleveland, he must first strike at the power that corruptly controlled the City Council, and which would prevent all proper assessment of land or anything else. With characteristic courage, therefore, he picked out the biggest of the lions in the way—the street railroad combination. He struck straight at it by seeking to prevent its use of certain tracks under expired or expiring franchises.

The war then was begun. And such a war was never seen before in a municipality. Not only did all the public franchise corporations in Cleveland combine against this superb champion of public rights, but similar corporations elsewhere joined in. Recognizing his great abilities and the danger to like privileges everywhere should once he succeed in Cleveland, the captains and princes of privilege in Chicago and New York sent lieutenants and money to work against him.

Opposition begets opposition. Johnson's power with the people waxed as they perceived his purposes and the gathering of his enemies. They elected a new council in practically full sympathy with him. Yet when the council tried to act, the Powers of

Privilege, controlling the state government at Columbus, changed the city charter and the state laws. When Johnson adapted himself to these changes, and still pressed on, those last defenses of Privilege were used, the courts. Defeated in what seemed sure plans a score, thrice a score of times, Johnson never would admit defeat. He merely changed his plans and pushed on.

He tried as mayor to start a municipally owned and operated street railroad, by giving special franchise grants and the renewal of expired grants from the old combination. The combination had the state deprive the city of power. The mayor tried to establish a competitive, privately owned line on a three-cent, as against the combination's five-cent fare. The new line had a provision to cancel its stock after paying interest and dividends on its obligations. The road was started and it did well. With state officials, the courts and a combination of banks, the old line harried, confused and struggled, but all to no avail.

At last, it seemed as if Cleveland's mayor had the powerful monopoly in a grip that it could not break, try as it would. Indeed, the monopoly hung out a white flag. It offered to sell out to the three-cent-fare road. An armistice was arranged while the terms of transfer were slowly worked over. At last a basis was reached and the Tom Johnson three-cent-fare road took over all the lines of Cleveland.

It looked now as if he was about to achieve municipal ownership and operation; and that he had thus cleared away the strongest foe to a true assessment and the first steps toward the application of the single tax.

But what had looked like the surrender of the street railroad combination proved to be treachery. For when Johnson's people had taken full charge of the old lines it was only to find that just before the transfer the old management had made a secret pledge to the labor unions to increase the wages of the men operating the lines. Johnson had always employed the best labor and paid the highest wages in the lines owned and operated by him; but to keep such an agreement as this, made in secret, and not communicated to him until after the responsibility of operation had fallen on him, was impossible. He could not make this wage raise and meet the financial conditions of the transfer. He told the men so. They struck. — The Powers then closed in on Johnson, hitting him publicly and privately in every way a man could be struck. They assailed his credit, with cold cynicism notifying him that they would "break" him financially. He smiled and gave his answer in one word: "Break!" And at last they *did* break him. They went further. They spared not even his good name. They resorted to every thinkable device to crush him. Yet still he bore up. The strain was terrible, however. Iron that he was, it began to show on him. His great figure began to shrink. A man came out of a doorway as the mayor was about to enter his motor car and said: "Hold a moment. I have a bet with a friend who don't believe it's you."

A second man approached and exclaimed in incredulous surprise: "Good God! I took his bet. I couldn't believe it was you. You're all shrunk up to nothing!"

Johnson smiled, got into his motor and rode away. He smiled bitterly but he kept on with the fight. He kept bravely on and went to his sorest defeat. He was beaten at the polls, beaten for a re-election to the mayoralty; beaten when his fortune was gone, his health broken, sickness was in his family, and when he was surest of election; when, indeed, he had his plans laid for triumph. Lies upon lies and tricks upon tricks had for the moment told; and he was thrown out of office. The people had failed him in the most critical moment of his life; and he stepped down, not complaining, but wounded to the soul.

Yet even then he would not yield. He valiantly announced that he would run again. And indeed there seemed cause for keeping good cheer. Had not some of his best lieutenants succeeded in election even if he had failed, and had not a majority of his candidates for the new local tax board been elected and now at last, under his eye and with his disengaged counsel, might it not start on the first steps toward the single tax?

The new board did at once settle down to the grave problems of its task and made rapid progress. But, alas, now when the hour of fruition was approaching, the great leader of the struggle was dying. They all knew it. They knew it even when they denied it. Tom Johnson knew it best of all. He only did not deny it. He faced it; bravely, with a smile; as he had before faced so many enemies. The long strain had brought organic trouble. The doctors could not cure; they could only allay the pain at times. Often that pain was torture. Yet he worked on. Between paroxysms he planned, instructed, cheered. He had properly been called "the best mayor of the best governed city in the world." He strove to go far beyond that. He had in his mind's eye *the most just city in the world*. He sought to lay the foundations of such a city on a hilltop, where all could see its shining walls, and all be inspired to build like cities over the earth.

For this he strove to his last breath. When the Death Angel came with the sword, Tom Johnson smiled and followed.

When the body was carried through the streets of the city for which he had given his life, as one dying in battle, the people seemed suddenly to realize their loss. Even his enemies conceded the greatness of his soul. Tens of thousands lined the streets and flags drooped. Those faithful unto and after death bore his body away to the spot in Greenwood Cemetery, New York, where Henry George was buried. On the crest of Ocean Hill the two friends, so close in life, now lie close in death; and their works do follow them.