

Henry George, Traitor

Benjamin R. Tucker

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The present oft recalls the past, and events of the recent political campaign forcibly reminded me of the shame of 1887 and the shameful part therein of one whose infamy shall not be forgotten. To the end that it may not, I purpose here to link the present to the past by a simple statement of facts.

In May, 1886, occurred the now historic tragedy of the Chicago Haymarket, when a bomb was thrown and policemen were killed and wounded. It is needless to review the details. As a result eight men—Spies, Parsons, Fischer, Engel, Lingg, Fielden, Schwab, and Neebe—were arrested, tried, and convicted of murder. All but Neebe were condemned to death; Neebe was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. The trial was a long one, and after it months were occupied in attempts to secure a new one and to save the lives of the condemned. During the spring, summer, and fall of 1887 the matter filled the public mind. Public opinion, inflamed by a prostituted press and cowards high in place, was at fever-pitch against the victims. Efforts were made to secure the intervention of influential persons in their behalf. But few responded to the call. Perhaps most notable among the few, because he risked the most and because his aid was least expected, was William Dean Howells. However brilliant the literary fame that he may leave behind him, his fame as a man, resting chiefly on the brave and simple appeal that he then made for justice, will far outshine it, and I am sure that to him this act is the most precious of his career. But because he was almost alone among the mighty his appeal was vain. The supreme court of Illinois, in a long and labored opinion, sustained the verdict of the lower court; the Supreme court of the United States gave an adverse decision regarding the points of law upon which an appeal to that tribunal had been taken; the governor of Illinois listened with ears of stone to all prayers for clemency; and on November Eleventh, Eighteen Hundred and Eighty-Seven, Lingg having previously taken his own life, Spies, Parsons, Fischer, and Engel were hanged, the commutation of the sentences of Fielden and Schwab to life-imprisonment being the only crumb of comfort flung to an enlightened minority hungering for justice.

Among the mighty in that day of trial, in that hour of national dishonor when every individual, especially every individual of prominence, had to choose between the path of shame and the path of glory, it is not unfair to include Mr. Henry George. A man of unquestioned ability; a writer of almost unparalleled lucidity and force; a public speaker whom vast audiences acclaimed with apparently unquenchable enthusiasm; a reformer who, in completely winning the love of the masses, had not failed to attach himself to many men of wealth and power among the classes;

and, withal, a man Whose honesty only a few of the more clearsighted had then begun to doubt,—to him perhaps more than to any other single person did lovers of liberty and friends of labor confidently look for willing and effective aid and leadership through and out of a crisis pregnant with results beyond all human vision. Less than a year before, he had astonished New York and the entire nation by rolling up a vote of 68,000 as an independent candidate for the mayoralty of this city. With the prestige that that event had given him, with his command of popular attention, and with his wonderful power of advocacy, it was not impossible that he should turn the tide of opinion, and compel authority to comply with the demand of a people awakened by his voice to a realization of the horror that was impending. At the very least he could have tried. For the hope that he would make the attempt he had given reason—so it is said, though I cannot vouch for the statement—by sending a message of encouragement to the men in their cells at Chicago. That at the time this message is said to have been sent he believed them to be innocent victims is on record in black and white over his own signature. At that time he had not been nominated for the office of secretary of State for New York. This nomination came to him some months later,—in the summer or early fall of 1887. His remarkable campaign of 1886 had inspired him with insane hopes of speedy political victory: In January, 1887, he had started his weekly paper, the “Standard,” and by this and other means he was bending all his energies to the creation of a new political issue in the Single Tax with himself as standard-bearer of a new political party. He claimed that he would poll 250,000 votes for secretary of State, and that with hard work he could be elected. The month of September, 1887, found him in the thick of this mad campaign. It was in that month, too, that the Illinois supreme court filed its opinion sustaining the verdict against Spies and his comrades. The time for action had arrived. Appeals to Henry George began to pour in upon him from friends of the condemned men and from readers of the “Standard.” He was in a dilemma,—one of those embarrassing dilemmas which men afflicted with the political itch have so often to confront. What should he do? Should he spring to the side of these innocent victims, upon whose fate turned the question of free speech in America, and thereby absolutely ruin his prospect of immediate political advancement, or should he continue in his mad struggle to attain the goal of his ambition, and leave the innocent to die? For some weeks he doggedly maintained a policy of silence. But the demand that he should take a stand became too loud to be ignored. And it was under this pressure that at last, in the “Standard” of October 8, 1887, appeared on its first page, over the signature of the editor himself, the article that at once damned Henry George forever in the eyes of every decent and unbiassed man. In substance Mr. George declared that, although he formerly looked upon the condemned men as innocent, he now believed them guilty of murder, because the supreme court of Illinois had so pronounced them, and that settled it. So well-nigh incredible is it that a man of Henry George’s intelligence and boasted mental independence should ever have given utterance to a conclusion so foolish and so slavish that today, nine years after the fact, if you venture to attribute it to him in talking with one of his admirers, the chances are ten to one that you will be vehemently told that Mr. George never could have taken, and never did take, such a position, and that you ought to be ashamed of yourself for so misrepresenting a noble man. That there may be no mistake about the matter, then, let me quote his exact words:

There is no ground for asking executive clemency in behalf of the Chicago Anarchists as a matter of right. An unlawful and murderous deed was committed in Chicago the penalty of which, by the laws of the State of Illinois, is death. Seven

men were tried on the charge of being accessory to the crime, and, after a long trial, were convicted. The case was appealed to the supreme court of the State of Illinois, and that body, composed of seven judges, removed, both in time and place, from the excitement which may have been supposed to have affected public opinion in Chicago during the first trial, have, after an elaborate examination of the evidence and the law, unanimously confirmed the sentence.

That seven judges of the highest court of Illinois, men accustomed to weigh evidence and to pass upon judicial rulings, should, after a full examination of the testimony and the record, and with the responsibility of life and death resting upon them, unanimously sustain the verdict and the sentence, is inconsistent with the idea that the Chicago Anarchists were condemned on insufficient evidence.

Unmistakable, is it not? No room for misrepresentation here. So clear is the meaning that every person who read the sentence which I have italicised, and who was capable of judging its author impartially, in his inmost heart put Henry George down as a liar and a coward. Some went farther, I among them, and put him down in print as such. The lamented William Morris, for instance, who was then editing the "Commonweal," found nothing less than capital letters adequate to the branding of George as TRAITOR, in a pithy paragraph of four or five lines, signed, if my memory serves, by the poet himself.

Nine years have passed since then, during which the man thus branded has made no acknowledgment of error, uttered no expression of regret, given no sign of repentance. But meantime significant things have happened. Let us move down a little from the remoter past toward the present.

In the fall of 1892, John P. Altgeld was elected governor of Illinois. In January of 1893 he was inaugurated, and before he had been in office many months he granted what the law calls a pardon to Fielden, Schwab, and Neebe. Governor Altgeld is himself a lawyer. He once held the office of prosecuting attorney, and later was a judge of the superior court of Illinois for a term of five years. Nevertheless, before deciding on this pardon, he called to his side, as trusted friend and counsellor, another judge of one of the high courts of the State. I suppose that I reveal no secret in naming him,—Judge Samuel P. McConnell, of Chicago. Together they went over the record of the famous case. At a certain stage in their examination, or at its end,—I am not sure Which,—Judge McConnell said to the governor:

"Though I think that these men should be pardoned, and though I ask you to pardon them, I desire to express to you, as your friend, my conviction that, if you pardon them, you will thereby seriously injure your political future."

"Damn it, Sam!" replied Altgeld, "if these men were unjustly convicted, I'll set 'em free, though it should prove my political death."

And so the pardon issued. It was a long, convincing, bold, and scathing document, probably the most merciless message of mercy ever penned. With unanswerable evidence and argument Governor Altgeld assailed the guilty conspirators against free speech, and, far from bowing to the decree of the Illinois supreme court, he ripped it completely up the back. As a result he has ever since been a target for the abuse and ridicule of the entire capitalistic press. Nearly four years have elapsed since the document was promulgated, during which its author has been careful to improve every opportunity to intensify the hatred of which he is the object among the privileged classes. And now we come down to the present time. On Saturday evening, October 17, 1896,

Governor Altgeld made a notable speech at Cooper Union in this city. The chief objects of this speech were condemnation of government by injunction and demonstration of the fallibility of courts of justice. One minute before the opening of the meeting and the entrance of Governor Altgeld, Henry George crossed the platform and took a conspicuous seat. The Single Taxers present rose to their opportunity, and made the hall ring with their applause. Any other man than Henry George, in a meeting in no sense his, would have acknowledged the greeting with a bow and then steadfastly kept his seat. But not he. Rising and crossing the platform with that pompous strut with which every one who has ever seen him parade before an admiring audience is familiar, he stood at the desk the incarnation of egotism, and with characteristic impudence began a speech. Before he could utter a half-dozen sentences he was cut short in the middle of one of them by the playing of the band in greeting to Altgeld. I confess that I do not like the looks of the Illinois governor. He is distinctly a disappointment to the eye. Yet I could not help contrasting, and greatly to his advantage, this slight figure of a modest, retiring man, free from any trace of vanity and plainly bored by the long-kept-up applause, with the swelling turkey-cock whose strut had just been so ingloriously cut short.

After some introductory speeches, the hero of the evening rose to address the audience. And then was witnessed the astounding spectacle of the man who, nine years before, had given his specific sanction to the legal murder of innocent men, that he might not damage a political future which, though in reality the baseless fabric of a dream, was in his eyes a shining certainty, rising with both hands lifted in honor of the man who, four years before, without the slightest hesitation and as if the most ordinary decency commanded it, had cast into the balance a political prospect which only the most ambitions of statesmen could have despised, in order to do all that lay within the bounds of human power to right the wrongs of persecuted innocence. An astounding spectacle, I say. Yet it would have been an inspiring one, had those who saw it been able to look upon it as an honest effort at atonement. But such it emphatically was not. It was only too evident that the man who had once endeavored to conceal his infamy behind the extraordinary and pusillanimous plea that a unanimous court can do no wrong was applauding the man who holds no court sacred, not to repudiate his past, but to make the people forget it,—that he had come to Cooper Union not to confess that he had been a coward, but to exploit in his own behalf the bravery of another. In vain did I try to imagine what went on in Henry George's mind as he sat listening to these rebuking words as they fell from the lips of a former occupant of the bench:

I say to my countrymen that there cannot be in a republic any institution exempt from criticism, and that, when any institution is permitted to assume that attitude, it will destroy republican government. The judicial branch of the government is just as much subject to the criticism of the American people as are the legislative and executive branches ... The judges of our federal courts are as honest as other men and no more so. They have the same passions and prejudices that other men have, and are just as liable to make mistakes and to move in the wrong direction as other men are, and the safety of the republic not only permits, but actually requires, that the action of the courts should be honestly and thoroughly scanned and freely criticised ... The mere fact that the supreme court has all through its career repeatedly reversed its own decisions shows its fallibility ... The decision of the supreme court does not in any case become a rule of political action the correctness of which the voter dare not question.

As Henry George listened to this simple truth, which the most ordinary mind must accept and which every honest mind openly acknowledges, did he reflect that he had once declared the supreme court incapable of error and its decision beyond question? Probably. It is my belief that he regrets his course in 1887 most bitterly. Not that he is in the least ashamed of it; not that he would not repeat it, if he felt as sure as he did then of a political gain in prospect; but simply that he realizes that he made a fool of himself, not gaining A what he hoped to gain, and losing what he now would like to have,—the honor which might have been his, but which another has bravely won.

I have no use for repentance. I regard it a deplorable waste of precious time and valuable material that any man, no matter who, should don sackcloth and ashes. But none the less am I certain that no frank and sincere man, realizing with shame that he has been guilty of an enormous folly in a matter of vital public interest, will neglect for a moment to expose his heart to public view. And the fact that during the last nine years Henry George has sought no opportunity to lay his heart bare assures me that the liar and coward and traitor of 1887 is, in his heart, a liar and coward and traitor still. So that which he refuses to lay bare I strip. The corruption thus made visible is not a pleasant sight, but it is a useful one, and I am determined that it shall never vanish by concealment. My hope, rather, is to fan the flame of a purifying indignation that shall dissipate the pestilence forever.

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