

## II

### IN POLITICS

**T**HAT a man of Tom L. Johnson's characteristics should take an interest in public affairs is but natural. His eyes were wide open. He was dealing with public corporations and public men. His enemies accused him of having bought city councils, in times when such proceedings were the rule and not the exception, and credited him with great cleverness. It must be said that he denied the truth of these accusations with emphasis, and that his later career was an antithesis to such assertions. He was past thirty years of age when he began to give attention to political problems, and entered into them with the fervency of his nature.

The story as to how he became interested in the subject was told by himself. He had been engaged in amassing a fortune, in mak-

ing money—in short, in “doing the other fellow.” He had “had no use for politics,” and had paid no attention to them. But on a day about the year 1885, when he was travelling between Cleveland and Indianapolis, a train boy offered him a book entitled “Social Problems.” Johnson supposed the book to be a work on the social evil and refused to buy it. The conductor, who heard his refusal, happened to know the book as the second work of Henry George, the first being “Progress and Poverty.” He told Mr. Johnson that he labored under a misapprehension and that the book would, no doubt, interest him. Finally Johnson bought it with some reluctance, for cash in those days was not plentiful with him. He was often obliged to scheme in order to procure a cheap railroad ticket. Reading the book, he was completely captured by it and bought also “Progress and Poverty.”

The contents of these works were a revelation to him. He felt like Joshua marching into a new land, and seeing new things.

Heretofore he had devoted himself to his business only and had never been much of a reader. His attorney in Cleveland at that time was L. A. Russell, an outspoken, fearless and eccentric man, but withal a thinker. With him Mr. Johnson debated over the theories of Henry George. The lawyer recognised the masterly arguments of Mr. George, but objected to the premises. Johnson convinced him that they were sound and converted him to his views and to those of the author of the books.

The next step Mr. Johnson undertook was to make the personal acquaintance of Henry George, and a warm friendship sprang up between the two men. In the year 1886 Johnson had gone to New York, where, with a small number of other gentlemen, he became one of the promoters of the single tax movement.

He was promptly swallowed up in the political turmoil of the Gotham of those days. His friend Henry George became the leader of a labor movement against Tammany Hall

and Abram Hewitt. Johnson contributed to the campaign fund and repeated the contribution a year later, when Henry George became the candidate for Secretary of State of the United Labor party. In this campaign Mr. Johnson took a more active part and began to acquire a taste for politics. His friend advised him to enter public life, to further the single tax movement. Johnson was willing and made his maiden speech in Cooper Union, New York, at the beginning of the year 1888.

It was thought advisable by Henry George that Tom L. Johnson enter Congress as a free trader of the Cobden pattern, and Tom L. Johnson returned to Cleveland, and became the Democratic candidate in a very strongly Republican district, the 21st of Ohio. He was defeated, but not discouraged, for two years later he again entered the same arena.

His Republican adversary was again Theodore E. Burton, now United States Senator from Ohio. Burton challenged him to a de-

bate, to his consternation, for Johnson at that time had but little experience in the art of speaking, while Burton was recognised as a master of the word. Johnson, nevertheless, accepted promptly on condition that the debaters take turn in arguments of ten minutes each, until the hour for closing. David slew Goliath, who consumed his ten minutes in preambles and never got to the meat of the pot.

Tom Johnson was elected to Congress by a majority of 3,000 votes. As a legislator he developed his greatest activity, worked for single tax legislation, tax reform and other things, new to the minds of those days. His success was small in a way, but his agitation was educating public opinion. In the year 1892 Mr. Johnson was re-elected and succeeded during his second term in causing Henry George's work on "Protection or Free Trade" to be printed in the Congressional record. In this manner over a million copies of the book were distributed throughout the land at public expense. He expected a

tariff revision, and was greatly disappointed when President Cleveland deferred consideration of the question.

On August 13, 1894, Mr. Johnson made his first great speech in Congress. It was against the Wilson tariff and full of aggressiveness. He attacked the amendments made by the Senate and adjured the Lower House not to descend to the level of the Upper House. In another speech on the same floor he spoke with the same directness for a flexible currency bill of his own and against a national bank bill. It was his last speech of any magnitude in Congress, for in the following election the people repudiated the Democrats, and Johnson was defeated by Burton.

From now on until Mr. Johnson became Mayor of Cleveland his energies were devoted to propagating the teachings of Henry George, to his street railway fight in Detroit, and his private affairs. He also took part in the mayoralty campaign of New York in

the year 1897, when his friend Henry George was a conspicuous candidate for mayor.

The unexpected death of Henry George, shortly before election, put an end to his political activity in New York. In 1899, having made the acquaintance of Governor Pingree of Michigan on the strength of his public utilities teachings, he went to Detroit. In conjunction with the Governor he began a street railway campaign, with the intention of bringing the street car system under public ownership, to reduce the fare, or make a free railway, taxing the adjacent land values for the expenses.

The necessary legislation for the purchase of the railroad by the City of Detroit was passed, and the bill was signed by the Governor. The city employed Professor Edward W. Bemis of Chicago, who had been forced out of the faculty of the University of Chicago, on account of his (more or less) socialistic tendencies. The Professor was employed to ascertain the value of the road.

Prospects for the plan were promising, but took a different turn when the Supreme Court of Michigan declared the municipal ownership law to be unconstitutional. The large business interests had acted. Johnson and his friend, the Governor, then resorted to the expedient of securing an ordinance from the city council of Detroit, by which a holding company was to run the railroad for the city. Governor Pingree was placed at the head of the company, which was to buy the system. Again the business men interfered, claiming that the purchase price of \$16,000,000 was exorbitant. Johnson was loudly accused of trying to bleed the city. The negotiations were broken off, the Council frightened, and in this state of mind, reconsidered the ordinance and let it die. Once more Mr. Johnson found it expedient to sell out his interest in a street railway company. It was said that he lost nothing by the transaction. His fortune was estimated at from three to four million dollars at that time.



Mr. Johnson was now in the prime of life, full of vigor and health, and active of brain. His experience had been wide and varied, yet he had not seen much of the world. A hurried voyage to Europe, business trips to some parts of the United States, or a swift political expedition to this or that city, completed his travelling experience. He had not the patience to study and observe foreign nations and their methods and thereby to broaden his knowledge and his mind. The desire to be doing something himself made him an inattentive observer, though he was very quick in perceiving. From a daring business man and occasional speculator in the stock market he had developed into a politician, preacher of new theories, and advocate of the people's rights.

He was ever ready to place his teachings in practice, to help the common people, to attack their enemies, and to march at the head of the army.

He was a born leader; he liked to rule and

to win, as his adversaries readily believed, in good faith. Such was the man when he became the "best mayor of the best governed city in the United States," as his friend Lincoln Steffens wrote in July, 1905.