
His Memory Will Point the Way

by Algernon Lee

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More than one man has said, during Morris Hillquit's life as well as since his death, that if he had given himself to the pursuit of wealth he could long ago have become a very rich man and that if he had sought a career in either of the major parties, the highest position in the cabinet and then a place on the supreme bench would have been well within his reach. When men have praised him for not yielding to either of these temptations, we Socialists have perhaps undervalued such praise.

We are mistaken if we think that upon such a man as Morris Hillquit neither wealth nor political eminence could exercise a very strong attraction. He had an avid appreciation for all those beauties and refinements of life which require leisure for their enjoyment and which, in the present state of society, are attainable in full measure only to the rich. To his ardent nature, public distinction and recognized success were likewise more attractive than to most of us. These things were tempting to him — of course they were. Of course he had to make the choice — not once and for all, but continuously throughout his life.

The true praise is not merely that he made the choice he did. The true praise is that there was something in the man — there was something in the youth almost fifty years ago — which made any other choice impossible. Being what he was, he could not but freely choose the harder path.

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We who are Socialists know, as few others can, that the life he lived, arduous as it was and often painful and lacking so much of what he wished for, was yet immeasurably richer and more glorious than are the lives of most who attain wealth and ease or high place and power.

He had his full share of suffering. When I say that I am not thinking only of bodily ills with which he had to contend for at least the last 17 years of his life. I am thinking much more of the wounds which were inflicted upon his proud and sensitive spirit by petty and ruthless and sometimes thoughtless men, both outside and within our camp. He did not display his wounds and ask for pity. But the wounds ached.

For all that, I think his life was rich. He could not fully know — we ourselves could not fully know until it was too late to tell him — what deep and tender affection for him dwelt in the hearts of tens of thousands of men and women. Yet I think he knew enough of it to give him great comfort and joy.

And we realize that no glory which can attach to outward success can equal the glory of being the trusted and freely chosen leader of such a movement as ours, which has no other rewards to bestow, and which confers that, not as a reward, but as a task.



That word “leader” has always been shockingly abused, and in these days more than ever before. It has long been applied to men who, as old Joseph Pulitzer once put it, keep near enough to the head of the procession to see which way it is going to turn and then make a short cut so as to be in front of it as the turn is made. And nowadays it is adopted as an official title by men who by the most treacherous and the most cruel means win and hold dictatorial power over whole nations. yet we have no other word for the man [who] truly leads because he is willingly and understandingly followed.

Morris Hillquit was a great leader. His greatness was most certain at the moments when he seemed for a time to have lost

or to be losing the leadership. He was a man who never wished to follow a lonely course, but who was able to follow what he saw as the right course, even if he had to go alone or with a corporal's guard instead of an army. And each time, with a certainty which was very disconcerting to his opponents, his course was after a while seen to be the right one and the army returned to it and to him. He was a great leader because he knew which way to lead, not because he was skilled in the arts by which so-called leaders often induce men to follow them.



As to principles and situations and issues, he had exceptionally sound judgement. As to men, his judgement was sometimes wrong — and when wrong, almost always in the way of taking them at face value. I do not think the often distrusted men who deserved his confidence. He did pretty often trust and push forward men who did not deserve it. That was a fault, but a good fault.

Perhaps it was a fault, too, that he could not feign a liking for those whom he disliked, and could not flatter and cajole those whose support he needed. This was, at any rate, a handicap to him in the practical parts of leadership.

One more thing everyone who worked closely with him can attest. He was the kind of leader — a rare kind — who never expected from his followers any compliance which they could not give without loss of self-respect. No one had to do for him anything which he would have been ashamed to do himself. No one had to shoulder responsibility for his acts. No one had to humiliate himself in order to keep his favor, nor could keep his favor by such means. Those who followed him will be proud of it as long as they live.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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