

## CHAPTER I

### EARLY YEARS

HENRY GEORGE was born in Philadelphia on September 2, 1839. His father, Richard George, was the son of a Yorkshire shipmaster who had settled in the United States and become the owner of two sailing vessels. Richard George himself was trained as a sailor, but never went to sea, though he performed several voyages on America's inland waterways. After a spell in the Philadelphia custom house he started a small publishing business which specialized in the issue of religious books and tracts. But in 1849 the growing competition of the general publishing houses in the field of religious literature compelled the firm to close down, and Richard George was glad to return to a clerkship in the custom house at 800 dollars a year.

The family which had to subsist on this meagre salary was a large one. Richard George was twice married. By his first wife he had two children, both of whom died young. His second wife, Catherine Vallance, was the daughter of a native of Glasgow who had emigrated to America and acquired some reputation as an engraver. She had received a genteel education, and retained throughout her life a smattering of culture. But her most engrossing interest was religion. She was a genuine if somewhat narrow-minded evangelical Christian. Of her large family of ten, Henry George was the second child and the eldest son. From his parents he derived a mixture of English and Scots blood, and both his grandfathers were British-born. But the environment in which he grew up, and the influences which shaped his character and outlook, were predominantly and distinctively American.

In 1839 Philadelphia was still confined within the limits

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traced out for it by William Penn. For long the largest and richest city in the United States, it had recently had to cede that position to New York. The strongest impression it left on the minds of visitors was a sensation of unrelieved monotony. The city lay spread out like a great flat brickfield, its outline unbroken by tower or steeple, its rectilinear streets cutting each other with the symmetry of a chessboard. Charles Dickens, who visited the place in 1842, wrote, "I would have given the world for a crooked street." The red houses which lined the brick-paved sidewalks were painful in their uniformity. All had the same colour and shape; all had green shutters on the upper windows and white shutters on the lower; all were reached by pretentious flights of marble steps. In its neatness and its cleanness, its primness and its dullness, Philadelphia reflected something of the spirit of its Quaker founders.

Since colonial days the streets running north and south had been known by numbers, and those running east and west by the names of trees and shrubs native to the province. Thus the little two-storey brick house in which Henry George was born was situated in Tenth Street, just south of Pine Street. It has now been acquired as a memorial by the Henry George Foundation of America. Shortly after Henry's birth the family moved to a house in Third Street, and it was here that the boy spent his early years.

The atmosphere of the George home was strongly pietistic. Cards and the theatre were forbidden pleasures, and the Sabbath was observed with puritan rigour. Richard George was a loyal member of the Episcopal Church and served as vestryman of St. Paul's. To-day, Episcopalians are not generally classed among the puritan sects, but in the early nineteenth century, moral austerity and evangelical zeal were characteristic of all American denominations, and indeed of American society generally. In Philadelphia, where men still walked the streets in Quaker garb, the opposition to worldly amusements and Sabbath desecration was exceptionally strong. When the government proposed to run mails on Sundays the populace drew chains across the streets to stop the stage-coaches. These chains continued a feature of Sunday life in Philadelphia

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for long after. The Georges could see them as they wended their way, two by two, to St. Paul's Church to hear a discourse from Dr. Newton, an eloquent "low church" preacher. Twice, and sometimes thrice, a Sunday the family pew was filled. In the interval between services the children attended Sunday School in a gloomy basement room, the windows of which were partially blocked by the tombstones in the churchyard. Only one anecdote of George's prowess as a Sunday scholar has survived. Dr. Newton visited the school one day, when the lesson was the evil of "picking and stealing." "Why," asked the doctor, "do the grocerymen have that wire netting over the dried peaches in the barrel at the store door?" Quick as lightning came the answer from young George, "To keep the flies out." The doctor flushed crimson at this maladroit suggestion. "No!" he thundered, "to keep the hands from picking and stealing."

Of regular schooling George had little. In this he did not differ from most American boys of his generation. De Tocqueville had commented a few years earlier on the state of American education.

"I do not believe there is a country in the world where in proportion to the population there are so few uninstructed and at the same time so few learned individuals. Primary instruction is within the reach of everybody; superior education is scarcely to be obtained by any."<sup>1</sup>

Of superior instruction George had none. What education he got never proceeded beyond the elementary stage. He attended a dame's school and spent some time at the Episcopal Academy, an educational institution of some repute. But there he did not feel at home and pleaded to be taken away. He was placed with a private tutor to be prepared for the High School. The tutor was a man of ability, discovered the boy's talents, and drew out his powers. But at the High School, Henry, on his own confession, idled and wasted his time. Before he was fourteen he was taken away at his own request, and began to earn his living as an errand boy at two dollars a week.

<sup>1</sup> *Democracy in America* (Reeve's translation), vol. i., pp. 59-60.

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That Henry George never enjoyed the benefits of a liberal education was a handicap to him in later life. A knowledge of languages, a grounding in science, and a greater familiarity with what had been done and thought in the past would have been helpful to him in his career as a social reformer. Yet it is doubtful if he could have acquired these advantages from a longer stay at the educational institutions of Philadelphia. American education at this time suffered from the blight of materialism. It paid too much homage to the spirit of Gradgrind. It fed the pupil with "useful" facts and did nothing to develop his character and intelligence. A sensitive mind like Henry George's could profit little from mechanical instruction of this kind. The course of self-education through which he put himself in later years did more to develop his intellectual powers than anything he could have derived from the pedagogues of his native city.

Nevertheless, in his spare time he made efforts to repair the defects of his schooling. He borrowed books from the libraries for which Philadelphia is famous. He attended evening lectures on popular science at the Franklin Institute. But these dry husks of knowledge could do little to nourish his active intelligence. Much more was to be learned from the stirring life around him. Philadelphia was still a magnet for emigrants, and men of all nationalities thronged its streets. It was the second port of the Union, and its harbour was crowded with tapering masts. George had seafaring in his blood, and the wharves were his favourite resort. He talked to the sailors and became familiar with the shape and rig of every kind of craft. He saw the first iron ship that sailed from Philadelphia, and worked out for himself an explanation why ships made of metal could float.<sup>1</sup> These varied experiences did more to broaden his mind and brace his faculties than all the arid learning retailed at the Franklin Institute.

Philadelphia is one of the few American towns with historical memories and monuments. As the boy roamed its streets he found much to stir his imagination and

<sup>1</sup> See his own account in his lecture on *The Study of Political Economy*, pp. 6-7.

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remind him of the past of the great republic of which he was born a citizen. In Chestnut Street, along which Washington marched his ragged troops to the battle of Brandywine, stood the old State House, where the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed and the federal constitution drafted. From 1790 to 1800 Philadelphia was the federal capital, and the city was full of memories of the Fathers of the Republic. In Christ Church was shown the pew where Washington worshipped, and outside in the graveyard the tomb of Benjamin Franklin with its inscription :

He snatched the lightning from the clouds and the  
sceptre from tyrants.

Not far from the State House was a reminder of a less glorious chapter in the nation's history. On his first morning in Philadelphia, Dickens gazed in amazement from his hotel window at an absurdly magnificent edifice in the form of a Greek temple, which looked "as if the marble statue of Don Guzman could alone have any business to transact within its gloomy walls." On inquiry he was told it was the United States Bank, "the tomb of many fortunes, the great catacomb of investment." The story of the Bank is the story of the first determined effort of the money power to capture sovereign authority in America, an attempt which was foiled by a great uprising of the agrarian West under the Jeffersonian democrat Andrew Jackson. The Bank's privileges were cancelled, and it was forced into bankruptcy. The Greek temple, its headquarters, was eventually taken over by the government as the Philadelphia custom house, and Richard George drove a quill within its walls.

.In a sense the two famous buildings in Chestnut Street symbolize two great currents in American history, two political tendencies which have come to be associated with the names of Jefferson and Hamilton. The State House represents the democratic ideal, the dream of a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. The Bank stands for the plutocracy which in so

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many different ways and under so many different disguises has prevented that dream from coming true. In the clash of these mighty opposites George played his part manfully. A Jeffersonian democrat to the core, he spent his life battling for the idealism of the State House against the materialism of the Bank.

At the age of fifteen George was a ruddy, blue-eyed youth, rather short of stature, slightly built, but alert and physically active. Already one of the chief flaws in his character had become visible. He was hot-tempered, wilful, and insubordinate. His father found him difficult to control. Once he ran away from home after being chastised for a slight fault. Fortunately such incidents were rare. The discipline of the household, despite the puritanism of the parents, was not unduly strict, and Henry, as the eldest son, enjoyed a privileged position—admired by his father, petted by his mother, and worshipped by his brothers and sisters. Still, the truth is he was more than a little spoilt.

Meanwhile the boy had to earn his living. In the bustling America of the eighteen-fifties the opportunities to enterprising youth seemed endless. It was the "hot air" period of American history. The young Republic was beginning to realize its strength, and its citizens were setting out to whip universal nature. A steady stream of emigration was flowing across the Atlantic, providing abundant hands for the plough and the loom; a growing industrialism in the North-east was tearing rich minerals from the earth and blackening the sky with its factory smoke; in the South the insatiable demand of Lancashire for its raw material was pouring gold into the pockets of the cotton planters; across the Appalachians a hardy population was pushing ever westward, in fulfilment of its manifest destiny to reach the Pacific. The whole business of money-making had been transformed. It was no longer a question of acquiring a competence. Vast fortunes were now within reach of the able, the energetic, the lucky, or the unscrupulous. With unquenchable ardour the whole nation plunged headlong into the race for wealth. Gone for ever was the calm sedateness of

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colonial days. The age of hustle had commenced. The American business man was on his throne.

Henry George grew up amid all this feverish activity. Incessantly, the gospel of material success was dinned into his ears. His elders represented money-making as a virtue, and wealth as the great measure of achievement. "If you are honest," one of his uncles told him, "if you are steady, if you are industrious, you can certainly look forward to being able to retire at forty with comfort for the rest of your days." There were plenty of examples of self-made men to confirm the truth of these words—Franklin, whose *Autobiography* every American boy knew by heart; Girard, the one-eyed Philadelphia banker, who left \$6,000,000; Astor of New York, with his fabulous wealth; and hundreds more. Henry's boyish ambition was stirred. He asked nothing better than to make a fortune. But he found it difficult to get a footing on the ladder of success. The post of errand boy had been exchanged for that of clerk in a marine store, but this represented no advancement. Moreover, certain instincts competed in his mind with his desire for a successful business career. From his seafaring grandfather, he had inherited a thirst for adventure, a longing to see distant lands and peoples. In none of the prosaic pursuits of the American bourgeoisie could such a yearning be satisfied. There was only one way in which a boy in his position could gratify his desire to travel, and that was by going to sea. Henry took the sudden resolve to be a sailor. The announcement of this determination caused consternation in the little household in Third Street, but the parents deemed it wise not to balk the lad of his ambition. Some experience of a sailor's life might cure him of his longing. A friend of the family, Captain Miller, had lately obtained the command of an old East Indiaman and consented to take Henry as foremast boy. "Don't make his berth too comfortable," said Richard George, and the captain promised. On April 2, 1855, Henry took leave of his family, travelled to New York, and boarded the sailing ship *Hindoo*, bound for Australia and India.