

CHAPTER III

CALIFORNIA

THE next twenty years of George's life were spent in the seething, bubbling cauldron of Californian society. He grew from youth to manhood in one of the most singular communities that the world has known. The invasion of the "forty-niners" wrought a terrible transformation in the sleepy California of Mexican days. Its primitive Spanish population, living under the easy sway of a handful of monks and hidalgos, was swept aside by the savage onrush of a horde of cosmopolitan adventurers. The city of St. Francis became the city of Mammon. The soil dedicated to the cult of poverty became the home of the most ferocious egotism. A whole population was driven literally crazy with the lust for gold. The yellow metal became the Californian's god. He tore it from the bowels of the earth. He wrested it by force or guile from his fellow-men. He spent his days and nights in a perpetual whirl of excitement—now intoxicated to madness by the hope of gain, now plunged into despair when fortune eluded him. The gambling fever had every one in its grip. It tainted all the operations of commerce and industry. The prosaic methods of acquiring wealth were held in universal contempt. The Californian's one dream was to "strike it lucky," to find a rich vein of ore, to make a successful deal in land or commodities. Nowhere was there a keener desire to appropriate the rewards of labour without effort. Nowhere was the goddess of chance worshipped with more frantic devotion. San Francisco was little more than a huge gambling hell.

In this morbid atmosphere the virtues which hold men together in societies withered and died. Human relation-

CALIFORNIA

ships dissolved in a whirlpool of greed and lust, and man, reduced to the level of the beast, preyed on his fellow-man. It is hard to imagine a more unfavourable soil for the nurture of an idealist. Yet it was in this uncongenial environment that Henry George evolved and matured his social gospel.

No inkling of what the future held for him, however, was in the mind of the lad who disembarked on San Francisco wharf that summer afternoon of 1858. He had come to California to seek his fortune, and his sole preoccupation was to seize the chances offered by this golden land of opportunity. As yet his plans were vague. He had thoughts of pushing on to Oregon. But for this he must secure his freedom. When he joined the *Shubrick* he had signed articles which bound him to serve for twelve months, and his year of service did not expire till November. George solved this problem in simple fashion. He took French leave. In plain language, he deserted. His cousin, Jim George, offered him the shelter of his house, and Henry lived quietly there until the danger of arrest was past. In point of fact, he need not have worried. Several officers and men of the *Shubrick* deserted to the goldfields, but by some accident George's departure was not noticed, and his name appeared on the ship's roll as having served out his full term.

When it was safe to venture abroad George explored the sights of San Francisco in company with a young Yankee, George Wilbur, whose acquaintance he had made. By 1858 the city had emerged from the first hectic period in its history. Two years before, the Vigilantes had organized the better elements of the population and established a measure of order. Life became tolerable for decent citizens. But the tradition of lawlessness died hard. Desperadoes, armed to the teeth, still roamed the streets; ex-convicts from Botany Bay preyed on their victims in dark lanes and side-alleys; shady Southern politicians brought with them their peculiar code of honour and insisted on settling their quarrels like gentlemen. Duels and shootings-up were of daily occurrence. Still the law-abiding part of the population had unmistakably got the

SINGLE-TAX GEORGE

upper hand. Architecturally, too, the city had made progress. The "cloth and paper" shanties of the pioneers were disappearing; substantial wooden buildings were being erected; and the community was acquiring some of the conveniences of civilized life. The streets rose, tier upon tier, from the waters of the bay, and through them moved a cheerful, colourful, cosmopolitan throng. The bearded American miner with his red shirt and high boots rubbed shoulders with the inscrutable Chinaman in his blue calico breeches and wide wickerwork hat. The Mexican lady in her graceful *reboso*¹ swept haughtily past the ogling French dandy, dressed in the latest Parisian fashion. Every clime under heaven had sent its representatives to the city of gold. In some streets "the proverbs of Sancho Panza were still spoken in the language of Cervantes" (Bret Harte). In others the air was heavy with the perfumed incense of the Oriental joss-house. Over all lay the golden sunshine of California, tempered by the cool breezes from the Pacific, while in the blue distance towered the lofty Sierras, beneath whose snowy summits an army of miners slaved to produce the yellow dust which was the basis of all this stirring, multifarious life.

George wrote home that San Francisco was "a dashing place, rather faster than Philadelphia"! But his mind was fixed on Oregon, and he waited impatiently for a letter from the Currys. No letter came, and the lad was left kicking his heels in San Francisco and consuming his small store of savings. Ultimately Mrs. Curry wrote that business was dull in the North-west and the chances of employment small. She recommended the lad to stay where he was. This was chilling news. No opportunity of work had presented itself in San Francisco, and George's supply of money was almost exhausted. At this juncture rumours spread that gold had been discovered on the Fraser River, just over the Canadian border. At once there was a wild stampede from the Californian diggings. Henry's cousin, Jim George, determined to profit by the rush. He went to Victoria, Vancouver, the jumping-off place for the diggings, and opened a miners' supply store.

¹ A kind of mantilla.

CALIFORNIA

Already this little town was swarming with ten thousand miners living in tents and shacks. Henry, having nothing else in view, decided to follow his cousin. Once more his seaman's training came in useful. He was able to work his way to Victoria on a topsail schooner. His intention was to try his luck at the diggings, but when he arrived he found that the "terrible Fraser" had come down in flood and brought all mining operations to a standstill. Till the waters fell there was no point in going farther. Henry gladly accepted a post as assistant in Jim George's store.

For the next two months Henry roughed it in traditional western fashion. The store was a little wooden hut near the harbour. A pinned notice invited customers who came outside the regular hours to "give the door a kick." Henry slept in the shop, and did all his own cooking and washing. To one of his sisters he wrote :

"You innocently ask whether I made my own bed at Victoria. Why, bless you, my dear little sister, I had none to make! Part of the time I slept rolled up in my blanket on the counter, or on a pile of flour, and afterwards I had a straw mattress on some boards. The only difference between my sleeping and my waking costumes was that during the day I wore both boots and cap, and at night dispensed with them."

The store was a convenient refuge, but George's fiery temper robbed him of this sanctuary. He quarrelled with Jim George, the fault, as he afterwards admitted, being on his side. Leaving the store, he took up his quarters in a tent, having as companion his friend Wilbur, who had also come to try his fortune at the diggings but was now driving a water-cart for a living. Life under canvas was a trying experience in the depths of a Canadian winter, and Henry's resolution began to ebb. Depressing news came down from the diggings. Miners arrived back in Victoria destitute and exhausted, bringing with them gloomy tales of disaster. Henry began to think (a surmise which ultimately proved correct) that the accounts of gold discoveries had been grossly exaggerated, and he resolved to go back to San Francisco. As he had no money to pay his fare, Wilbur lent him some and saw him on the boat.

SINGLE-TAX GEORGE

"He had no coat," Wilbur related afterwards, "so I gave him mine. An old fellow named Wolf peddled pies among the tents, and thinking that Henry would enjoy these more than the food he would get aboard the ship, we bought six of them and drew the blanket over them so that nobody would see them and steal them. He wrote me from San Francisco when he got down that the first night out he was so tired that he threw himself down on his bunk without undressing and that he did not think of the pies until the morning, when he found he had been lying on top of them all night."

Back in San Francisco the search for work proved as fruitless as before, and Henry had almost made up his mind to sign on again as a seaman when by good luck he ran across a printer whom he had known in Philadelphia. This friend secured him a printing job which kept him going for several months. Then business became dull, and he was once more on the street. Resolved to stick at nothing, he became a weigher in a rice mill. But even this gave out in the early summer of 1859. In a fit of desperation the lad started to walk to the Californian goldfields. It was a rash and foolish undertaking. Before he had gone far he had to give up through sheer want of food, and make his way as best he could back to San Francisco.

At this desperate crisis of his fortunes his Philadelphia printer friend came again to his rescue and got him a compositor's place on a weekly paper, the *Home Journal*. This was the steadiest job Henry had had since he came to California. It lasted for over a year. At first he had to work as an apprentice, but when he came of age in September 1860 he drew journeyman's wages, and shortly afterwards was promoted foreman at \$30 a week. After the buffetings of the last two years George was glad to settle down. His hard experience had cooled his ambition. He gave up his dreams of making a fortune and accepted the position of wage-earner as his permanent lot. About this time he joined the local printers' trade union, honorary membership of which he retained till the end of his life.

During this period the young man roomed in various quarters of San Francisco. When he came back from the Fraser he stayed at a temperance hotel, the "What Cheer

CALIFORNIA

House," which had a library of several hundred volumes. George browsed among this collection and made his first acquaintance with some of the great classics of English and American literature. He came across a copy of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, but contented himself with inspecting the outside of the book. His interest in economics was not yet aroused. After he left the "What Cheer House" he kept up his general reading. Wilbur, who was now back from Vancouver, and with whom he shared a lodging, relates :

"Very soon after our acquaintance I discovered that he was studious and eager to acquire knowledge, and when we came to room together, I frequently woke up at night to find him reading or writing. If I said 'Good heavens, Harry, what's the matter? Are you sick?' he'd tell me to go to sleep or invite me to get dressed and go out for a walk with him. A spin round for a few blocks would do and then we'd get to bed again. I never saw such a restless human being."

About this time George took a step, the importance of which his family enormously exaggerated. He joined a Methodist congregation. His mother at once leapt to the conclusion that he had undergone the process of conversion.

"Good news, good news!" she wrote ecstatically. "Oh how much better the Lord has been to us than we deserved! . . . I now desire to say 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. For thou hast delivered the soul of my child from death and his feet from falling.'"

Mrs. George was under a complete misapprehension. Henry had joined the church mainly because some friends belonged to it and invited him to become a member. Temperamentally, he had little sympathy with the evangelicalism of his parents, and it is practically certain that he never at any time went through the religious experience of conversion. Yet he was not irreligious by nature. After a period of youthful scepticism he worked out for himself a creed of his own, a kind of emotional Theism, to which he adhered for the rest of his life. He was not an orthodox

SINGLE-TAX GEORGE

Christian. He once said that his religious views were those of Jefferson, and Jefferson was not a believer in the Trinity. In George's simple credo, the two main items were the Fatherhood of God and the immortality of the soul. Yet, more so than in the case of most professing Christians, his religion was an active force in his life and a dynamic of his thought. When he came to work out his social and economic theories, he took as his starting-point the two great religious doctrines which he had come to hold with all the fervour of his passionate nature—the belief in a benevolent Creator and the hope of a life after death. Despite his unorthodoxy, his approach to social problems was very much that of the English Christian Socialists.

Meanwhile fate had become unkind to him again. The *Home Journal* came to an end, and George lost his regular job. He was reduced to doing occasional work for newspapers—"subbing," it was called. To escape from this precarious position he formed a plan to buy up a moribund newspaper called the *Evening Journal*. He entered into a partnership with five other unemployed printers. They pooled their small savings and purchased the plant and goodwill of the newspaper at a cheap rate. The partners decided to gather the news themselves and do the printing with their own hands. Ten years earlier such a scheme might have had a chance of success, but in the eighties the day of the small man in newspaper production was practically over. George and his friends toiled like galley slaves. "I worked," said George afterwards, "until my clothes were in rags and the toes of my shoes were out. I slept in the office and did the best I could to economize, but finally I ran in debt thirty dollars for my board bill." No sacrifices were of the least avail. In October 1861 the tottering enterprise received a fatal blow when the trans-continental telegraph line was completed. The *Journal* could not afford to buy telegraphic news. George became convinced that the struggle was hopeless and withdrew from the business, sacrificing the little money he had put into it. He went back to "subbing," at which he could always earn a little.

While the young man was waging this hard battle with

CALIFORNIA

circumstance, great events were taking place in the political sphere. The slavery question at last split the nation in twain. In November 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected President, George, who had just come of age, recording his first vote for him. The secession of the Slave States followed, and the whole series of stormy events which set North and South in arms against each other. Like most Californians, George enthusiastically embraced the cause of the North. If he had still been living in Philadelphia he would have undoubtedly enlisted in the Union army. But in the days before the transcontinental railway, San Francisco was farther from New York than New York from London. California, indeed, scarcely formed part of the American political system. As a state she supported the North, but she could render no direct military aid to the federal government. If a Californian wished to strike an active blow in defence of the Union, he had first to travel east at his own expense. In George's case this was utterly out of the question, and so he was condemned to remain a spectator during one of the most stirring periods in his country's history. He did not relish his forced inactivity.

"I cannot help feeling regret," he wrote home, "that the contest will be over and the victories won without my having taken the slightest part in it. If I am East after the war is ended, I will feel abashed among its heroes."

In the meantime fate summoned him to face a crisis in his own life.