

CHAPTER V

JOURNALISM AND POLITICS

SINCE his youth George had had an itch for scribbling, but hitherto his literary instincts had found no outlet except in letter-writing and the keeping of innumerable diaries. Now he resolved to put his turn for writing to a more regular and profitable use. His career as a professional writer may be said to date from the Saturday afternoon when he filled in the time waiting for his dinner by composing a little essay on "The Profitable Employment of Time." This youthful effort has survived. It begins with lamentations over the writer's wasted opportunities :

" The hours which I have idled away, though made miserable by the consciousness of accomplishing nothing, had been sufficient to make me master of almost any common branch of study. If, for instance I had applied myself to the practice of bookkeeping and arithmetic I might now have been an expert in those things ; or I might have had the dictionary at my fingers' ends ; been a practised and perhaps an able writer ; a much better printer ; or been able to read and write French, Spanish or any other modern language to which I might have directed my attention ; and the mastery of any of these things now would give me an additional appreciable power, and means by which to work to my end, not to speak of that which would have been gained by exercise and good mental habits."

But the essay ends on a more hopeful note. ' "

" To sum up for the present, though this essay has hardly taken the direction and shape which at the outset I intended, it is evident to me that I have not employed the time and means at my command faithfully and advantageously as I might have done, and consequently that I have myself to blame for at

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least a part of my non-success. And this being true of the past, in the future like results will flow from like causes. I will therefore try (though as I know from experience, it is much easier to form good resolutions than to faithfully carry them out) to employ my mind in acquiring useful information or practice, when I have nothing leading more directly to my end and claiming my attention. When practicable, or when I cannot decide upon anything else, I will endeavour to acquire facility and elegance in the expression of my thought by writing essays or other matters which I will preserve for future comparison. And in this practice it will be well to aim at mechanical neatness and grace, as well as at proper and polished language."

To this determination George steadfastly adhered. Two days after he had written this essay he sent a long letter to the editor of a newly established trade union paper, and shortly afterwards a sketch of his, called "A Plea for the Supernatural," appeared in the *Californian*, a literary weekly which numbered Bret Harte and Mark Twain among its contributors. Following upon this a magnificent journalistic opportunity presented itself. On April 14, 1865, the news was flashed across the wires that President Lincoln had been shot in Ford's Theatre, Washington. The excitement in San Francisco, as in all American cities, rose to fever-heat. Next day George lent a hand in wrecking the offices of certain newspapers suspected of Southern sympathies, and then went home to write a short article on the tragedy. He sent it to the *Alta California*, the paper on which he happened to be setting type at the time, and it appeared with a note stating that it was the work of a compositor in the printing office. It was headed "*Sic Semper Tyrannis*," the words shouted by the assassin when he leapt on the stage after firing the fatal shot. To-day, its bombastic, inflated style reads strangely, but at the time the turgid rhetoric awoke a sympathetic response in the minds of its excited readers. The last paragraph will give some idea of its quality :

"*Sic semper tyrannis!* Blazoned on the shield of a noble state¹ by the giants of the young republic, their degenerate

¹ Virginia.

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sons shall learn its meaning ! The murderer's shout as Lincoln fell, it will be taken up by a million voices. Thus *shall* perish all who wickedly raise their hands to shed the blood of the defenders of the oppressed, and who strive by wickedness and cruelty to preserve and perpetuate wrong. Their names shall become a hissing and a reproach among men as long as the past shall be remembered ; and the great sin in whose support they spared no crime is numbered henceforth with the things that were. *Sic semper tyrannis ! Amen.*"

The article provoked much appreciative comment, and George followed it up with another on the character of Lincoln, which was printed as an editorial. Pleased with the young compositor's work, the editor commissioned him to write an account of the mourning decorations for the dead President. This was the first regular piece of journalistic work that George had received, and it seemed to bring him to the threshold of a new career. At last the clouds were lifting, and the young man saw before him a way of escape from the cramping environment of the composing room. Yet it is characteristic of George's utter lack of worldly wisdom that just at the moment when his prospects were brightening, he was prepared to throw all his chances away in the pursuit of a hare-brained adventure. An expedition was being organized in San Francisco to carry aid to the Mexican patriots fighting Napoleon III. and his puppet the Emperor Maximilian. The affairs of Mexico were no earthly concern of George's, yet he made up his mind to join the expedition, though it meant leaving his wife and children without any visible means of support. It says much for Mrs. George's loyalty that she consented to this crazy proposal. Fortunately, it came to nothing. An old ship was brought into San Francisco harbour on which the conspirators were to embark, but a federal cutter dropped anchor at the mouth and blocked the way out. This was the end of the enterprise. Among the filibusters were some of the choicest types of Californian ruffian, and it was George's opinion that the expedition might easily have degenerated into a pirate cruise. Indeed, in after years this episode was made the ground of a charge against George that he had once been a pirate.

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Towards the end of the year George got the offer of work on a State printing contract in Sacramento, and spent another twelve months in the State capital. During this time he did not neglect his writing. He regularly contributed letters to the chief Californian papers, and an article on an incident of the *Shubrick* voyage was published in the *Philadelphia Saturday Night*. Sacramento had a literary and debating society called the Lyceum. George attended its meetings and obtained some practice in the art of public speaking. All this time he was on the look-out for a regular journalistic appointment, and a half promise of a place on the staff of a new newspaper, the *Times*, drew him back to San Francisco at the end of 1866. The promise came to nothing, and George had to be content with a job in the composing room. But some of his articles were accepted from time to time and printed in the paper. The editor of the *Times*, Noah Brooks, was favourably impressed with the young man's work. One day he strolled into the composing room to have a look at him. He was shown a slight, bearded, undersized young man standing on a board to raise him to the height of his case. "I was not impressed with him," Brooks wrote later, "and little dreamed that there was a man who would one day win great fame—as little dreamed of it as no doubt he did."

After a little spell of waiting the wished-for opening came. George was appointed reporter on the *Times* at \$30 a week. Then with surprising swift unexpected promotion followed. In June 1867 Brooks resigned, and George was offered his place as managing editor at \$50 a week. Sudden advancements of this kind were common in Californian journalism in the eighteen-sixties. George held his new post for nearly a year. It was a comfortable one. He was making more money than he had ever done before, and he was gaining invaluable experience. But the swell-headed young fellow was not content with this. He demanded a rise in salary, and when it was refused, resigned, though he had no alternative work in prospect. Mrs. George's patience must almost have reached breaking-point. George, whose self-confidence had grown with the rapidity of the prophet's gourd, thought he could have

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another newspaper job for the asking. He was sadly disappointed. Nothing offered except the editorship of a trumpery "rag," which George gave up after a few weeks after a quarrel with the proprietor. Months elapsed before he secured regular journalistic work, and his new post was none of the best. Nugent, proprietor of the *San Francisco Herald*, wished to secure admission to the Associated Press, the agency through which most of the Californian newspapers secured their eastern news. He commissioned George to go East and conduct the necessary negotiations. If admission was refused George was to try to organize an independent news service. The transcontinental railway was not finished at this time, and George crossed the plains in a "four-horse mud wagon." "I spent many nights," he related afterwards, "sitting at the driver's side, and I was all the more impressed, therefore, when we reached the railroad and got a sleeping-car. We had to sleep two in a berth, however."

After a flying visit to his parents at Philadelphia, George went on to New York and made formal application to the Associated Press for the admission of the *Herald*. This, after many vexatious delays, was refused, the other Californian newspapers being unwilling to share their privileges with a rival. Thereupon George set about organizing a private news service. With the assistance of John Hasson, one of his boyhood friends, he opened a Press bureau, first at Philadelphia and then at New York, and made an arrangement by which he secured access to the special dispatches of the *New York Herald*. These he telegraphed to San Francisco across the wires of the Western Union Company. Here a new difficulty arose. The rival Californian papers persuaded the Western to raise its charges to the *Herald*, while lowering them to the other users of the service. George's fiery nature boiled over at this unfair treatment. He had a stormy interview with the vice-president of the Western.

"I told him in very plain terms," he wrote to Nugent, "what I thought of his company and how this operation would appear to the public; that it was meant to crush the 'Herald' and would crush the 'Herald'; was meant to prevent any future

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opposition to the Associated Press and would do so until a new line was built ; that they had virtually agreed to give a monopoly of the news business to the Association for 40,000 dollars a year—less than they were now getting ; that I could not say what you would do, but that if it was my paper I would issue my last number on the 1st of May, declare that it was killed by the Western Union Telegraph Company, who had sold a monopoly to the other papers, fill it with the history of the whole transaction and print an immense edition which I would circulate all over the Union."

The vice-president answered with smooth words, but held out no hope that the company would alter its decision. Thereupon George resolved to carry out his threat of an appeal to the public. He drew up a lengthy account of what had happened, and sent it to the principal newspapers in the eastern states ; then he sat back and waited for the explosion. " You will hear thunder all around the sky," he wrote to a friend, " notwithstanding the influence of the Western Union and the Associated Press." Never was there a grosser miscalculation. Only one paper of any importance published George's protest, and the public remained quite unmoved by the recital of the wrongs of the *Herald*. It was George's first disagreeable experience of the impotence of the written word against the material force of associated capital. Greatly discouraged and dejected, he returned to San Francisco.

There further disappointment awaited him. Nugent, though he had been so ably served by his energetic lieutenant, gave him a very cool reception, and refused to pay up some arrears of salary and expenses until threatened with a legal action. Disgusted with this shabby treatment, George broke off his connection with the *Herald*. He worked at odd jobs for a time, occasionally being driven back to the composing room, until he was appointed editor of a small paper, the *Transcript*, published at Oakland, across the bay. While at Oakland an incident occurred which earned for him some publicity. One of the burning questions of the hour in California was the problem of Chinese labour. In this controversy George took the popular side. Rather surprisingly for one of his liberal

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views, he favoured the imposition of restrictions on Chinese immigration. While he was in New York on the business of the *Herald* he published a long article on the subject in the *New York Tribune*, which caused a mild sensation, both in the East and the West. In picturesque language George explained to the New Yorkers the extent to which the Celestials had penetrated every branch of economic life in California.

“Stand, say at Clay and Sansome Streets, San Francisco, about six in the afternoon and you will see long lines of Chinamen coming from American workshops. Pass up Jackson, Pacific or Dupont Streets into their quarter, and you may see them at work on their own account. Beside the stall where the Chinese butcher carves his varnished hog or makes mince-meat of stewed fowl with a cleaver such as was used by his fathers long before our Saviour sent the Devil into the swine, you may see Chinamen running sewing-machines, rolling cigars or working up tin with the latest Yankee appliances. In front of the store window in which great clumsy paper clogs and glistening anklets are displayed, and through which you may watch the bookkeeper casting up his accounts on an abacus and entering them with a brush from right to left in his ledger, the Chinese cobbler sits half-soling and ‘heel-tapping’ ‘Melican’ boots. Underneath the Buddhist temple, a disciple of Confucius mends the time-pieces of the American Clock Company and repairs Waltham watches. In the Mail Steamship Company’s office, the Chinese clerk will answer your inquiries in the best of English. And in one of the principal drug-stores of Sacramento a Chinaman will put up a prescription for you, or if your taste runs in that way, in a saloon near by, a Chinaman will concoct for you a mint julep or whisky-cocktail; while wherever you go, in hotel or boarding-house, it is more than probable that hands better used to the chop-stick than the fork prepared the food you eat, let it be called by what high-sounding French phrase it may.”

This invasion of cheap yellow labour, George insisted, must of necessity bring down the level of wages on the Pacific Slope.

“It requires no argument to show that to take five dollars a day from five men and to divide it again between them and two more, would be a losing operation to the five.”

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George was here appealing to the wages-fund theory of the orthodox economists, according to which the amount of capital earmarked for the payment of wages at any time was a fixed amount, and any addition to the number of workers among whom it had to be divided would necessarily bring down the general rate.

Finally he dwelt at length on the threat to American civilization if so utterly alien a race were allowed to settle in large numbers in the United States.

“The Mongolians who are now coming among us on the other side of the continent differ from our own race by as strongly marked characteristics as do the negroes, while they will not so readily fall into our ways as the negroes. . . . The negro when brought to our country was a simple barbarian with nothing to unlearn; the Chinese have a civilization and history of their own; a vanity which causes them to look down on all other races, habits of thought rendered permanent by being stamped upon countless generations. From present appearances we shall have a permanent Chinese population . . . a population born in China, reared in China, expecting to return to China, living while here in a little China of its own, and without the slightest attachment to the country—utter heathens, treacherous, sensual, cowardly and cruel.”

This article gave great satisfaction to the anti-Chinese party in California. It was reprinted in several papers, and the Mechanics State Council, a working-class body, issued it as a separate pamphlet. George ventured to send a copy to John Stuart Mill, the leading economist at that time of the English-speaking world, with whose standard work he had made a cursory acquaintance while writing the article.¹ Mill, writing from Avignon, courteously acknowledged the communication.

“Concerning the purely economic view of the subject, I entirely agree with you,” he wrote. . . . “That the Chinese immigration if it attains great dimensions, must be economically injurious to the mass of the present population; that it

¹ “I went to the Philadelphia library,” said George, “looked over John Stuart Mill’s *Political Economy*, and accepting his views without question, based my article upon it.”

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must diminish their wages and reduce them to a lower stage of physical comfort and well-being, I have no manner of doubt. . . .

"But," he went on, with the facile optimism of the nineteenth-century liberal, "there is much also to be said on the other side. Is it justifiable to assume that the character and habits of the Chinese are insusceptible of improvement? The institutions of the United States are the most potent means that have yet existed for spreading the most important elements of civilization down to the poorest and most ignorant of the labouring masses. If every Chinese child were compulsorily brought under your school system, or under a still more effective one if possible, and kept under it for a sufficient number of years, would not the Chinese population be in time raised to the level of the American?"

When this letter arrived George was editing the *Transcript* at Oakland. He immediately published it with an editorial underlining the admissions of the English economist, but paying a warm tribute to him as a writer and a philosopher. Mill's reputation was then at its height, and the respect with which he treated the arguments of the obscure Californian journalist was a useful advertisement for George and helped to strengthen his position in the newspaper world of the Pacific coast.

The publicity he acquired was profitable to him in another way. It introduced him to the stage of politics. The Democratic leaders in the State fixed their eyes on him as a likely recruit. Since his adolescence George had been a Republican. He had been a supporter of Lincoln and had voted for General Grant at the election of 1868. But the rapid deterioration of the Republican Party after the Civil War and its degeneration into a tool of big business had disgusted him, and he was now ready to welcome advances from the opposite political camp. Thus when the managers of the Democratic caucus in California offered him the editorship of the *Sacramento Reporter*, the chief party organ in the State, he at once accepted, and moved for the third time to the State capital to take up his new duties.

The leader of the Californian Democrats was Governor Haight, a man of character and ability, and like George, a converted Republican. The State elections were drawing

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near, and Haight determined to make the railway question the chief point in the Democratic programme. This was a subject in which George had for long taken a keen interest. Since he came to California he had followed closely the growth of the great railway systems which were linking up the Pacific with the East. He had stood in the crowd at Sacramento in 1863 when the first shovelful of earth was turned in the construction of the Central Pacific. He had joined in the national rejoicings in 1869 when the Central Pacific joined up with the Union Pacific at Ogden, Utah, and the dream of a transcontinental railway was at last realized. But all the time he was acutely conscious of some of the drawbacks associated with the new form of transport. In an early article, "What the Railroad will bring Us," he had predicted a fall in wages as a result of uniting California with the East. And while in New York in 1869 he had attacked Leland Stanford and other railway barons in the columns of the *Tribune* :

"So far as cheapening the cost of transportation is concerned, the Pacific Railroad has as yet been of no advantage to the people of the Pacific coast, who have to pay just as much as, and in some cases more than, when they relied on horse or ox flesh. There would be some excuse for this if the road had been constructed by private means; but it has been and is being built literally and absolutely by the money of the people, receiving liberal aid from cities, counties and State of California, as well as the immense gratuity of the general government. . . .

"But minor grievances sink into insignificance when the enormous political power which these great Pacific Railroad corporations can wield is considered. The Central Pacific can dictate to California, Nevada and Utah, and the Union Pacific to the states and territories through which it passes more completely than the Camden and Amboy dictated to New Jersey, and each or both will be able to exert an almost irresistible pressure upon Congress in any manner in which their interests are involved. I don't know about the Union Pacific, but the Central already influences conventions, manages legislatures, and has its representatives in both Houses at Washington. And it is already buying up other corporations and bids fair to own the whole railroad system of the Pacific."

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The irony of the situation, as George pointed out, was that the railways had really been built by the public that was being fleeced. The companies had received enormous subsidies, 16,000 to 48,000 dollars for every mile of track, as well as thousands of acres of free land on each side of the railway line. Yet in return for all this generosity they had set themselves systematically to bleed the community. It was one of the most disgraceful ramps in American history.

The Democrats proposed, if returned, to curb the power of the railway barons, to reduce the swollen amount of their dotations from the public purse, and to give railway users some protection against exploitation. The case against the companies was so overwhelming that the party managers looked forward confidently to a sweeping electoral victory. George threw himself enthusiastically into the campaign. He wrote powerful editorials in the *Reporter*; he published a pamphlet on the railway question which was circulated as a party manifesto; he stood as candidate for the State legislature in one of the San Francisco districts. But against the colossus of the Central Pacific the flood of reason and argument broke helplessly. With unlimited powers of corruption at their command, the directors faced the contest without anxiety. The elections took place in the autumn of 1871. On the morning of the polling day George left his house in high spirits, anticipating a glorious triumph for his party. He returned in the evening looking slightly dashed, but with a twinkle of amusement in his eye. His wife asked how the results had gone. "Why," he replied almost with a shout, "we haven't even elected a constable!" The completeness of the disaster appealed to his sense of humour. But it was no laughing matter for him. Not only had his political ambitions received a decisive check. He had lost his means of livelihood as well. Following its usual methods, the Central Pacific had stepped in and bought up the *Sacramento Reporter*. George, who indignantly refused to conform to the new policy of the paper, was promptly sacked. Once more he had learned how impotent is the pen of the mere journalist against the grosser weapons wielded by the power of capital.