

CHAPTER VIII

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THE mood of elation in which *Progress and Poverty* was finished quickly evaporated when George began to hunt for a publisher. The first he tried was Appleton of New York. The manuscript came back with a polite rejection-slip.

"We have read your manuscript on political economy. It has the merit of being written with great clearness and force, but is very aggressive. There is very little to encourage the publication of any such work at this time, and we feel we must decline it."

Harper and Scribner were next applied to, but neither would touch the book. George wrote to the few friends he had in New York, and they personally interviewed publisher after publisher, but without success. At this time there was very little demand in America for works on political economy, except as university or college textbooks, and obviously *Progress and Poverty* was not a textbook. George began to think his book would never see the light. In despair he resolved to publish it at his own expense. He had no money, but he had a printer friend, William Hinton, formerly his partner on the *Evening Post*. Hinton consented to set up the book and to take payment when George was ready. On 17th May the work was begun, and George's diary for that day contains the entry: "Commenced to set type on book. Set first three sheets myself."

While the book was passing through the press George gave the manuscript a thorough revision, rearranged the order of the chapters, and inserted some additional matter. By the autumn of 1879 the work was finished, and the

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first edition of *Progress and Poverty* appeared. Five hundred copies were printed off. George sent one of them to his aged father in Philadelphia, and wrote confidently :

“ It is with a deep feeling of gratitude to Our Father in Heaven that I send you a printed copy of this book. . . . It represents a great deal of work and a good deal of sacrifice, but now it is done. It will not be recognized at first—maybe not for some time—but it will ultimately be considered a great book, will be published in both hemispheres, and be translated in different languages. This I know, though neither of us may ever see it here.”

The part of this prophesy which predicted the early neglect of the book seemed likely to be amply realized. The reviews in the Californian papers were cool and inappreciative, and the sales were moderate. George's journalistic rivals thought it “ a damned piece of audacity that Harry George should write a book at all,” and they agreed with the reviewer of the *Alta California* who declared that it would be “ dropped out of view in a short time as a blunder of a mind more active than wise.” George relates how General Beale, a large ranch-owner, expressed to him the intellectual pleasure with which he had read *Progress and Poverty*.

“ This he said, he had felt at liberty to enjoy, for to speak with the freedom of philosophic frankness, he was certain my work would never be heard of by those whom I wished it to affect.”

On the other hand, courteous notes came from some of the notabilities to whom George sent presentation copies. Gladstone acknowledged receipt of the book on one of his postcards. Sir George Grey, the great British proconsul and land reformer, wrote from New Zealand :

“ I have already read a large part of the book. . . . It has cheered me much to find that there is so able a man working in California upon subjects on which I believe the whole future of mankind now mainly hangs.”

One thing the author's edition did achieve. It secured for the book a New York publisher. Appleton wrote that

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they would bring out an edition if the plates prepared by Hinton were placed at their disposal. George gladly consented, and after a little delay the New York edition appeared, with a dedication "to those who, seeing the vice and misery that spring from the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege, feel the possibility of a higher social state and would strive for its attainment." Now that the book was circulating in the East, George's hopes began to rise, but his optimism was dashed when Appleton reported that the sales were mediocre, and that they had failed to persuade any English publisher to buy the English rights. This was most disheartening, but George's faith in his work remained unshaken.

"It is the most important contribution to the science of political economy yet made," he wrote to a friend. "On their own ground and with their own weapons, I have utterly broken down the whole structure of the current political economy. . . . The professors will first ignore, then pooh-pooh, and then try to hold the shattered fragments of their theories together; but this book opens the discussion along lines on which they cannot make a successful defence."

Illness and poverty combined to darken his existence at this time. He suffered from biliousness and bladder trouble, brought on by anxiety and overwork. Financially, he was in very low water. The sale of the author's edition had not met the expenses of printing. George was in debt to Hinton and others. The New York edition was earning very little in the way of royalties. And for the last two years the gas inspectorship had brought in practically nothing. Now, even this slender source of income was cut off. In January 1880 a Republican governor took office and dismissed George from his post. An attempt to start a small weekly paper ended in failure, and George came to the despairing conclusion that he had exhausted all the means of earning a livelihood in California. In the circumstances he began to look East, as formerly he had looked West. On his former visit to New York he had made a few journalistic friendships, and had maintained relations in particular with John Russell Young of the *Tribune* and Charles

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Nordhoff of the *Herald*. To these he now wrote for help and advice. Both replied encouragingly, promising to do what they could to get him a position on a New York newspaper, and Young considerably offered to lend him his fare to New York. After some hesitation George took the plunge. In the summer of 1880 he burnt his boats and set out for the East. He could not take his family with him ; he had no money to pay their fare ; and he had to do the long railway journey in the uncomfortable third-class cars of the Continental express. But the change of scene and the prospect of a new career restored the buoyancy of his spirits, and when the train stopped to coal at Winnemucca he sent back a cheerful letter to a friend :

“ I am enjoying the trip and am full of hope. The spell is broken and I have taken a new start.”

The New York which George entered on an August day of 1880 was a city of over a million inhabitants, with no statue of Liberty and no skyscrapers. The elevated railway was only a few years old, and the suspension bridge to Brooklyn was still in course of construction. Years of municipal corruption had deprived the second richest city in the world of many of the ordinary conveniences of life. The public services were neglected. Over the ill-paved streets the carriages rocked like ships on a stormy sea, and along the side-walks domestic ash-barrels scattered filth and odours till late in the day. The contrast of luxury and squalor was typical of the Empire City. Wealth and poverty rubbed shoulders daily in its streets. From the palatial marble residences of the upper town it was only a short walk to the teeming tenements of the East Side, where stalwart Irish policemen, armed with cruel batons, kept order among a swarming population of aliens. Farther south, in the business quarter, the pedestrian walked beneath meshes of wires over networks of tram-lines, and his ears were assailed by a hideous medley of noises—the rumble of wheels, the jangling of tram bells, the piercing shrieks of ferry-boat whistles. Already, twenty years before O. Henry gave it the name, New York was Noisyville on the Hudson. The thunder of its traffic never died.

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The swirl of restless humanity through its streets knew no pause. Day and night the arteries of "million-footed" Manhattan throbbed to the feverish beat of its tumultuous life.

To O. Henry, New York was Baghdad on the Subway, but to George, engaged in a deadly wrestle with poverty, it had none of the glamour of the capital of the caliphs. He encountered no romantic adventures in its streets. No mysterious stranger thrust gold into his hand. On the contrary, he found the problem of earning a livelihood as difficult as in California. The main object of his journey East was not realized. Despite the recommendations of his journalist friends, he failed to obtain a regular position on a New York paper, and he was reduced to writing pot-boiling articles for magazines and acting as the jackal of a local Democratic politician, Abram Hewitt. Hewitt employed him to prepare a Congressional report on labour conditions, but George was dissatisfied with the remuneration he received and terminated the engagement abruptly. Though he needed the money badly he would not work for less than he considered himself worth. He was indeed what the French call a "perpendicular" personality. The same rigidity of temperament embroiled him with the local Democratic caucus, and ruined any prospects he might have had as a politician. When he arrived in New York the Garfield-Hancock presidential contest was in full swing. The local Democrats, hearing of his success as a party orator in California, invited him to stump the State on behalf of Hancock. George agreed, but claimed more liberty of speech than the party managers could allow. The tariff issue had been raised, and the Democratic leaders had decided to hedge. George, however, was an uncompromising free trader and refused to conceal his opinions. At his first meeting he treated his audience to sarcastic comments on the party strategy.

"I told them," he related afterwards, "that I had heard of a high-tariff Democrat, though I could not conceive how there could be such a thing, and I knew there were men who called themselves revenue-tariff Democrats; but there was also another kind of Democrat, and that was a no-tariff

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Democrat, and that what was wanted was to sweep away the custom houses and custom house officers and have free trade. Well, the audience applauded, but you ought to have seen the men on the platform there ; and I went off without a man to shake my hand. I got that night as I was going to my next engagement a telegraphic dispatch asking me to go by mid-night train to New York. The chairman of the committee met me and begged me not to make any more speeches."

George did not obey this injunction. His engagement with the party caucus was at once terminated, but over in Brooklyn he found a group of independent Democrats who were in revolt against the party machine. On their platform he made several stirring free trade speeches. Andrew M'Lean, then on the staff of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, the organ of the recalcitrant Democrats, was at one of these meetings. He had already studied *Progress and Poverty* and become a convert to its doctrines, but had never actually seen the author in the flesh.

"One night," he relates, "I dropped into Jefferson Hall while a mass meeting was being held without knowing precisely who were to speak. I was tired out with newspaper and election work and was glad to find a seat out of the way, and must admit that I drowsed during the remarks of some of our more or less familiar Brooklyn men. Presently a new voice commenced, and the abrupt, direct, clear-cut sentences, together with the radical meaning they bore, startled me. I stood up and looked at the new speaker. He was a short, sturdy man, with scant hair and full reddish beard. I had never before seen him. But I could not mistake his style of speech. I said to myself 'Thou art the man. There most certainly is the author of that book *Progress and Poverty*.' I did no more drowsing, and after the speech was over, I went and introduced myself to Mr. George."

Hancock's straddle on the tariff question did not save him from defeat, but it disgusted and scandalized George. He lost interest in party politics, and severed his connection with the Democratic machine. "Yes," he wrote a year later, "look at the Republican party, and also look at the Democratic party! It is pot and kettle. I am done." (May 25, 1881.)

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Behind all this mental activity was a background of grinding poverty. Hack journalism brought in little, and more than once George thought seriously of returning to the compositor's case. In San Francisco his wife was driven to take in boarders, and eventually she had to sell up her furniture and go into rooms. The news caused George a cruel pang.

"My pleasant little home, that I was so comfortable in, is gone, and I am afloat at forty-two, poorer than at twenty-one. I do not complain, but there is some bitterness in it."

He was driven once more to appeal to the generosity of his friends. Returning a loan of \$20 to Dr. Taylor, he wrote (May 12, 1881):

"You do not know and I cannot readily tell you how much this little accommodation has been to me. It is not so much the want of money as the mental effect it produces—the morbid condition. The man who does not understand that, does not know how it is possible for people to commit suicide."

It was hard during this miserable time to hear of the success of contemporaries in California who had acquired the riches which always seemed to elude George. Strolling one evening down Broadway he ran up against "a good fellow whom I knew years ago in California when he could not jingle more than one dollar on another. It is different now, and he takes a wad of bills from his pocket to pay for the thirty-five cent cigars we light. . . . He tells me about some big things he has got into, and talks of millions as though they were marbles."¹ With this favoured child of fortune George contrasted the men crouching on the benches of the public squares, "from whose sullen deadened faces the fire of energy and the light of hope have gone—tramps and bummers, broken, rotted human driftwood, the pariahs of society."² And more than ever he became convinced of the glaring injustice of the existing system.

The one drop of comfort during this dreary time was the growing popularity of *Progress and Poverty*. Appleton had

¹ George, *Social Problems*, p. 79.

² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

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brought out a cheap paper edition priced at a dollar which had gone off well. In January 1881 George could write :

“ About the book. *At last*, it begins to look as though it had really taken hold. When I came East, I found that it had hardly got started here. And until the last two weeks in December it went very slow. But then a movement began, and on the last day of the year every copy of the previous editions and every copy of the thousand of the cheap edition were gone, and orders and inquiries came piling in from every quarter.”

Appleton's were now able to sell the English rights. In December 1881, Kegan, Paul, Trench and Co. brought out an English edition which was quickly sold out. A German translation was prepared by a German-American sympathizer, Gutschow, and published in parts at the end of 1880. And by an arrangement with the proprietors of the *New York Truth* and the *Chicago Express*, the whole of *Progress and Poverty* appeared serially in these newspapers and reached a wide circle of readers.

In the spring of 1881 George published his third book. It arose out of an article which he had proposed to write on Irish affairs. Ireland was at this time figuring prominently in the news. Parnell was practising obstruction in the British Parliament, and the Land League, founded by Davitt, was waging merciless war against landlords with the weapon of the boycott. George followed the course of the Irish agitation with keen interest. He had already met Davitt, once in San Francisco and again in New York. He could not but feel sympathy for this pathetic figure, the victim of agrarian and industrial tyranny ; the son of the Mayo peasant who had seen his cabin unroofed before his eyes ; the Lancashire mill-boy whose arm had been torn off by the cruel teeth of a spinning machine. Davitt, who all his life had socialistic leanings, was intensely interested in George's ideas and promised to do what he could to push the sale of *Progress and Poverty* in Britain. To George, Ireland seemed an admirable text on which to preach a sermon in favour of the single tax. The magazine article which he started to write gradually swelled into a sixty-

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page pamphlet, and in this form it was published in March 1881 under the title of *The Irish Land Question*. In later editions it was called simply *The Land Question*, and this is a more appropriate title, because George's contention in the book is that the Irish agrarian problem was not something peculiarly Irish. It was only one phase of the universal land problem of all countries. In point of fact, Irish land law was slightly more favourable to the tenant than the land laws of England or the United States. The misery of the Irish peasant was not the result of English tyranny. It was an inevitable consequence of private property in land. Hence the usual remedies suggested—fixity of tenure, peasant proprietorship, etc.—were perfectly futile. Nothing would be of the slightest use except the taxation of land up to its full rental value. George appealed to the Land Leaguers to transform their agitation from a narrow nationalist movement into an international crusade against landlordism. He entreated them not to inflame hatred against England but rather to try and convert Englishmen to their views. Let them advocate Home Rule, but not complete political independence, the separation of England and Ireland being as unthinkable as the separation of the Southern States of America from the North.

The little book attracted considerable attention. It sold well and received favourable reviews in the American papers. Three separate editions appeared in England. One effect of its popularity was to bring George into touch with the leaders of the Irish organizations in America. He was employed to lecture on behalf of the American Land League, and set off on a tour which took him over the border into Canada. Owing to his mercurial temperament, his success as a lecturer varied. Sometimes he could sweep an audience off its feet. At other times, when the fire of inspiration burned low, he was dull as the dullest. At Montreal his first lecture was a total failure. "Don't know whether to attribute it to bad physical condition," he wrote in his diary, "or that I cannot get up enthusiasm in going over the same ground twice. 'Tis certain that I should have written it beforehand. Will try to do better to-

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morrow. Feel very bad, but must try to pluck victory from defeat." Next day he was in better vein. "Did it," he notes. "Best ever have done. Astonished and pleased them all."

On his return to New York he found an important proposal awaiting him. Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World*, the organ of the Irish extremists in America, an apostle of dynamite, but a believer in land nationalization, offered to send him to Europe as correspondent of the paper. He was to get his passage paid and \$60 a week. The offer was a tempting one, but there were reasons why George could not at first accept it. He was heavily in debt. He owed money both in New York and in California. During a flying visit to San Francisco he had lectured to a crowded audience at the Metropolitan Temple, but an importunate creditor had tried to garnishee the proceeds. George felt it would be dishonourable to run away from his liabilities. From this predicament he was rescued by a wealthy sympathizer, Francis Shaw, father-in-law of the poet Lowell. Shaw had already purchased a thousand copies of *Progress and Poverty* for distribution to public libraries. Now, learning of George's embarrassment, he advanced him a loan which enabled him to pay off the most pressing claims. This left him free to accept Ford's offer. He decided to take his wife and two girls with him. Richard, the younger son, was sent to school, while Henry, the elder, was placed in a newspaper office. There was some talk of sending Henry to Harvard, but his father could not overcome his prejudice against university education. "Going to college," he told the boy, "you will make life friendships, but you will come out filled with much that will have to be unlearned. Going to newspaper work, you will come in touch with the practical world, will be getting a profession and learning to make yourself useful." Andrew M'Lean found the lad a reporter's place on the *Brooklyn Eagle*. At the outset of his journalistic career his father gave him the following rules for good writing: "First, to make short sentences; second, to avoid adjectives; third, to use small words; and fourth—a general rule—not to attempt 'fine' writing; to say as simply and as briefly

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as possible all that should be said and then to stop." Excellent rules which George himself unfortunately found it hard to observe.

Before leaving for Europe he paid a farewell visit to his parents in Philadelphia, taking his two boys with him. In the train they overheard him say musingly to himself :

" When I had finished *Progress and Poverty* I was certain that I had written a great book and that the time would come when the truth in it would set the world afire. But I could not feel confident of seeing in my own lifetime more than perhaps a hundred persons who would grasp it and believe in it. Yet now, only two years after its publication, it is being talked of all over the world and men are rising up everywhere to hail it."

In this optimistic mood he embarked on the steamship *Spain* and sailed for Liverpool.