

CHAPTER I.

COMMENCES THE GREAT INQUIRY.

1869. AGE, 30.

IT is said that what put the iron into Abraham Lincoln's soul against chattel slavery was an auction sale of negroes—men, women and children, husbands and wives, parents and infants—which he witnessed while a young man at New Orleans, to which place he had gone down the Mississippi on a flat boat.

Likewise, what put the iron into Henry George's soul against industrial slavery was the contrast of poverty with wealth that he witnessed in the greatest city in the new world, when on the visit to New York in the winter of 1868-69. Apparently fully occupied with the difficulties of establishing a telegraphic news service for the western newspaper, there were in reality pauses when the mind, swinging clear of all personal affairs, leaped into the realm of problems that beset mankind. For in the idle hours, when another might have sought amusement, this young man, as by a kind of fascination, walked the streets of the great city, thinking how here, at the centre of civilisation, should be realised the dream of the pioneer—the hard conditions of life softened, and society, preserving the general relations of equality, raised as a mass from the bottom into a state of peace and plenty. How different the view

that met his gaze! On every hand he beheld evidences of advanced and advancing civilisation, but of a civilisation that was one-sided; that piled up riches for the few and huddled the many in filth and poverty. And just as in assailing the great telegraph and press monopolies he did not wait to be supported, but boldly and alone stepped forth to the contest, so now this unknown man, not yet quite thirty, of small schooling and scarcely tried abilities, whose past had led through poverty and adversity, and whose future was shrouded in uncertainty, audaciously refused to accept the edict of the House of Have—the edict sanctioned by the teachers of learning and preachers of religion, that all this want and suffering was in the nature of things and unalterable. His heart and mind denied it. Everywhere else in creation was order, design. Could they fail on reaching man, “the roof and crown of things?” He could not believe it. Silently, without telling any man of what he did, he set himself the task of finding the natural order. In his speech of acceptance of the first New York mayoralty nomination seventeen years afterwards he said:

“Years ago I came to this city from the West, unknown, knowing nobody, and I saw and recognised for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want. And here I made a vow from which I have never faltered, to seek out, and remedy, if I could, the cause that condemned little children to lead such a life as you know them to lead in the squalid districts.”¹

This was not a vague resolution without backing of thought. It was rather a sudden crystallisation of pro-

¹ Also see “Progress and Poverty,” Conclusion; and “The Science of Political Economy,” Book II, Chap. viii, p. 201.

tracted meditations; a flashing conviction and passionate resolve. For him all at once the bush burned, and the voice spake: "The people suffer; who will lead them forth?" In a letter to Rev. Thomas Dawson of Glencree, Ireland (February 1, 1883), he wrote:

"Because you are not only my friend, but a priest and a religious, I shall say something that I don't like to speak of—that I never before have told any one. Once, in daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call—give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true."

Now while the young philosopher's mind was to work gradually towards the solution of the problem of deepening poverty in the midst of advancing wealth, he did something in the East in the early part of 1869 that attracted more attention than anything he had before accomplished. As he has said in "The Science of Political Economy,"¹ "John Russell Young was at that time managing editor of the 'New York Tribune,' and I wrote for him an article on 'The Chinese on the Pacific Coast,' a question that had begun to arouse attention there; taking the side popular among the working classes of the Coast, in opposition to the unrestricted immigration of that people." The article appeared on May 1, filled several columns of the "Tribune," and was signed.²

The immigration of the Chinese in considerable numbers

¹ Book II, Chap. viii, p. 200.

² Horace Greeley was the editor-in-chief of the "Tribune," and in the same issue with Henry George's Chinese article appeared the first installment of Greeley's essays on political economy.

commenced soon after the discovery of gold in California. They spread over the Pacific Coast and crept into many of the more common fields of labour, soon incurring general and active opposition, being regarded as an alien and non-assimilable race. In this "Tribune" article, Mr. George explained and justified this hostile feeling—the first time, probably, that such views were published on the Atlantic Coast. The kernel of his presentation was this:

"The population of our country has been drawn from many different sources; but hitherto, with but one exception, these accessions have been of the same race, and though widely differing in language, customs and national characteristics, have been capable of being welded into a homogeneous people. The mongolians, who are now coming among us on the other side of the continent, differ from our race by as strongly marked characteristics as do the negroes, while they will not as readily fall into our ways as the negroes. The difference between the two races in this respect is as the difference between an ignorant but docile child, and a grown man, sharp but narrow minded, opinionated and set in character. The negro when brought to this country was a simple barbarian with nothing to unlearn; the Chinese have a civilisation 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; but a population whose individual components will be constantly changing, at least for a long time to come—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. They bring no women with them (and probably will not for a little while yet). . . .

"Their moral standard is as low as their standard of comfort, and though honest in the payment of debts

to each other, lying, stealing and false swearing are with the Chinamen venial sins—if sins at all. They practise all the unnamable vices of the East, and are as cruel as they are cowardly. Infanticide is common among them; so is abduction and assassination. Their bravos may be hired to take life for a sum proportionate to the risk, to be paid to their relatives in case of death. In person the Chinese are generally apparently cleanly, but filthy in their habits. Their quarters reek with noisome odours, and are fit breeding-places for pestilence. They have a great capacity for secret organisations, forming a State within a State, governed by their own laws; and there is little doubt that our courts are frequently used by them to punish their own countrymen, though more summary methods are oftentimes resorted to. The administration of justice among them is attended with great difficulty. No plan for making them tell the truth seems to be effective. That of compelling them to behead a cock and burn yellow paper is generally resorted to in the courts. . . .

“The Chinese seem to be incapable of understanding our religion; but still less are they capable of understanding our political institutions. To confer the franchise upon them would be to put the balance of power on the Pacific in the hands of a people who have no conception of the trust involved, and who would have no wish to use it rightly, if they had—would be to give so many additional votes to employers of Chinese, or put them up for sale by the Chinese head centres in San Francisco.”

Almost twenty-five years later (November 30, 1893), in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, the younger, Henry George spoke of the “Tribune” article as “crude,” inasmuch as he “had not then come to clear economic views.” He referred to his exposition of the wages question, which he was led to discuss by the contention of the great California railroad corporation and other large employers of Chinese labour that such employment inured to the benefit

of other labourers by liberating the latter for engagement in other fields of industry, at the same time cheapening the cost of production in the primary fields that they had left and thereby cheapening all those primary commodities that all must buy. "Wishing to know what political economy had to say about the causes of wages," he wrote in "The Science of Political Economy"¹ relative to this point: "I went to the Philadelphia Library, looked over John Stuart Mill's 'Political Economy,' and accepting his views without question, based my article upon it." In a conversation at another time he said,² "It was the first time I had made any investigation of what political economy had to say on the subject of wages, and I adopted unquestioningly the doctrine of the relation between wages and capital laid down by Mill."

That is to say, doing now as he once had done in embracing the protective principle, and "accepting the belief on the authority of others," he abandoned the suggestion of his own spontaneous thought when writing the article "What the Railroad Will Bring Us," namely, that wages in California had a relation to "the natural wealth of the country. . . . not yet monopolised"—and "adopted unquestioningly" the explanation made by the man famous as the great master of political economy, that wages depend upon the ratio of labourers to the so-called wages fund—to the capital devoted to the payment of wages. How completely this was so is shown by a passage in the "Tribune" article.

"There is a tendency of wages in different industries to an equilibrium, and of wages in general to a level which is determined by the relative proportions of capi-

¹ Book II, Chap. viii, pp. 200, 201.

² Meeker notes, October, 1897.

tal and labour. . . . Plainly when we speak of a reduction of wages in any general and permanent sense, we mean this, if we mean anything—that in the division of the joint production of labour and capital, the share of labour is to be smaller, that of capital larger. This is precisely what the reduction of wages consequent upon the introduction of Chinese labour means.”

“This article attracted attention especially in California,” Mr. George wrote in his last book. While just beginning to rise to attention on the Atlantic side of the country, the Chinese question was a burning one on the Pacific side. Some of the California newspapers reprinted parts of the “Tribune” article and commended it. The workingmen’s organisations hailed it with particular satisfaction, in the early part of 1871 it being reprinted in full and circulated by the Mechanics’ State Council of California. This organisation, though intended primarily for the protection of workingmen’s interests, at that time had considerable influence in California politics.

But long before this action of the Mechanics’ State Council the chief San Francisco newspapers were drawn into a renewed discussion of the “Tribune” article by a letter from a high outside source. Mr. George says in “The Science of Political Economy” that a copy of the “Tribune” article he sent from California to John Stuart Mill brought a letter of commendation. The letter was received in November, 1869, at Oakland, an over-bay suburb of San Francisco, where George had just begun the editing of a little daily called the “Transcript,” of which more will be learned later. On Saturday, November 20, he published a long editorial and in it printed the Mill letter in full, saying by way of explanation:

“It is frequently asserted here that the opposition upon the part of the labouring classes to the immigra-

tion of Chinese arises from ignorance of the laws of political economy, and that so far from having a tendency to reduce them to a lower condition, the effect of Chinese labour will be to elevate them. Conceiving that the views of so distinguished an authority would be of much value, the gentleman to whom this letter is addressed wrote to Mr. Mill, requesting an opinion upon this point, as well as upon the general subject."

Then came the Mill letter:

Avignon, France, Oct. 23, 1869.

"DEAR SIR: The subject on which you have asked my opinion involves two of the most difficult and embarrassing questions of political morality—the extent and limits of the right of those who have first taken possession of the unoccupied portion of the earth's surface to exclude the remainder of mankind from inhabiting it, and the means which can be legitimately used by the more improved branches of the human species to protect themselves from being hurtfully encroached upon by those of a lower grade in civilisation. The Chinese immigration into America raises both of these questions. To furnish a general answer to either of them would be a most arduous undertaking.

"Concerning the purely economic view of the subject, I entirely agree with you; and it could be hardly better stated and argued than it is in your article in the 'New York Tribune.' That the Chinese immigration, if it attains great dimensions, must be economically injurious to the mass of the present population; that it must diminish their wages, and reduce them to a lower stage of physical comfort and well-being, I have no manner of doubt. Nothing can be more fallacious than the attempts to make out that thus to lower wages is the way to raise them, or that there is any compensation, in an economical point of view, to those whose labour is displaced, or who are obliged to work for a greatly reduced remuneration. On general principles this state of things, were it sure to continue, would justify the

exclusion of the immigrants, on the ground that, with their habits in respect to population, only a temporary good is done to the Chinese people by admitting part of their surplus numbers, while a permanent harm is done to a more civilised and improved portion of mankind.

“But 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 civilisation 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? I believe, indeed, that hitherto the number of Chinese born in America has not been very great; but so long as this is the case—so long (that is) as the Chinese do not come in families and settle, but those who come are mostly men, and return to their native country, the evil can hardly reach so great a magnitude as to require that it should be put a stop to by force.

“One kind of restrictive measure seems to me not only desirable, but absolutely called for; the most stringent laws against introducing Chinese immigrants as coolies, *i. e.*, under contract binding them to the service of particular persons. All such obligations are a form of compulsory labour, that is, of slavery; and though I know the legal invalidity of such contracts does not prevent them being made, I cannot but think that if pains were taken to make it known to the immigrants that such engagements are not legally binding, and especially if it were made a penal offence to enter into them, that mode at least of immigration would receive a considerable check; and it does not seem probable that any mode, among so poor a population as the Chinese, can attain such dimensions as to compete very injuriously with American labour. Short of that point, the oppor-

tunity given to numerous Chinese of becoming familiar with better and more civilised habits of life, is one of the best chances that can be opened up for the improvement of the Chinese in their own country, and one which it does not seem to me that it would be right to withhold from them. I am, dear sir,

“Yours very sincerely,

“Henry George, Esq.,

“J. S. MILL.”

“San Francisco, Cal.”

Commenting on this, the “Transcript” editorial said: “With all its qualifications, Mr. Mill’s opinion entirely justifies the position of those who take ground in favour of restrictions upon the immigration of these people,” for “Chinese labour has already begun to compete injuriously with white labour, and that it will soon be competing *very* injuriously, no one who has noticed how rapidly these people are entering and monopolising one branch of business after another, can have any doubt.” Moreover, nine-tenths of the Chinese immigrants are contract labourers and it would be useless to pass laws against such contracts; while as for slavery, “Chinese women are sold and staked at the gambling table in San Francisco every day of the week.” The editorial concluded with this tribute to the eminent English economist:

“Yet, whether we agree or disagree with his opinions; whether we adopt or dissent from his conclusions, no American can fail to have for this great Englishman the profoundest respect. It is not merely the rank he has won in the republic of letters; not merely the *service* he has rendered to one of the most beneficial, if not the noblest, of sciences; not merely the courage and devotion with which he has laboured for the cause of popular rights in his own country; not merely his high private character and pure life, which set off his great

talents and public virtues, that entitle John Stuart Mill to the respect of Americans. Beyond all this, they can never forget that he stood the true friend to their country in its darkest day; devoting his great talents and lending his great reputation to the support of the Republic when she had closed in what seemed there her death grapple; that it was he more than any other man who turned the tide of English opinion and sympathy in our favour, and by exhibiting the true character of the struggle, gave us the moral support of the middle class of Great Britain. Services such as these entitle John Stuart Mill to something more from us than even the respect which is due him as a writer, statesman or philosopher—to our affection as well as our admiration.”

The “Transcript” editorial with the Mill letter made something like a sensation throughout California. Some of the pro-Chinese papers republished both in garbled form, and in such form the letter may have got back to Mill. At any rate, an editorial on the subject in the Chicago “Tribune” drew from Mill a communication to Horace White of that paper, saying that judging from the comments, the published copy of his letter must have been a mutilated one. White published this. Mr. George had meanwhile become editor of the “Sacramento Reporter.” Seeing the Mill letter to White, he promptly republished it and also the earlier Mill letter to himself, putting both in a signed editorial explaining that there had been no garbling at any time on his part. This article he sent to Mill, who made reply that he was “perfectly satisfied.”

Some of the pro-Chinese papers in California, while not attempting to garble the original Mill letter, took to abusing Henry George; one of them, the San Francisco “Bulletin,” saying that Mill had been misled by George in the “New York Tribune” article, as that was “written from the exaggerated standpoint of a certain class of political

alarmists who either have not carefully studied the facts or who use the question as a good demagogue card to win ignorant votes." But notwithstanding such utterances, George's "New York Tribune" article expressed a strong and strengthening sentiment that soon dominated State politics, inspired a long series of legislative acts, and eventuated in 1892, twenty-three years afterwards, in the passage by Congress of the Geary law, prohibiting "the coming of Chinese persons into the United States" and providing for deportation under certain conditions.

To the end of his life Mr. George held to the views against free entrance of the Chinese set forth in his "Tribune" article in 1869. They appear in many of his subsequent California speeches and writings, and in 1881 were set out fully in a signed article published in Lalor's "Cyclopedia of Political Science, Political Economy and of the Political History of the United States."

And when in the fall of 1893, William Lloyd Garrison of Boston addressed a letter to James G. Maguire, who represented the Fourth California District in Congress, upbraiding the congressman with being false to his single tax principles of equal rights, in supporting and voting for an amendment extending the Geary Chinese Exclusion Act, Mr. George replied (New York November 30), a copy of the letter to Maguire having been sent to him by Garrison:

"To your proposition that the right to the use of the earth is not confined to the inhabitants of the United States, I most cordially assent. But what you seem to think follows from that, 'The humblest Chinaman has as much natural right to use the earth of California as yourself, and it is your inalienable right to change your residence to any land under the sun,' I most emphatically deny. Are men merely individuals? Is

there no such thing as family, nation, race? Is there not the right of association, and the correlative right of exclusion?

"Your parallel between those who supported slavery and those who oppose Chinese immigration is not a true one. The first of the evils wrought by African slavery in the United States was the bringing hither of large numbers of the blacks, an evil which still remains a source of weakness and danger, though slavery is gone. Let me ask you: If to-day there was the same possibility of a great coming of African negroes to this country as there would be of Chinamen if all restriction were removed, would you consider it a wise thing to permit it under present conditions? And would you consider it at all inconsistent with your anti-slavery principles or with your recognition of human equality to try to prevent it? I certainly would not. . . .

"I have written to you frankly, but I trust not unkindly. I have for you too much respect and affection to wantonly accentuate any difference there may be in our ways of looking at things."

But while approving of Chinese exclusion "under present conditions," Henry George could conceive of a state of things under which such a policy would not be necessary. In a lecture in San Francisco¹ while writing "Progress and Poverty," he said: "Ladies and gentlemen, it is not only more important to abolish land monopoly than to get rid of the Chinese; but to abolish land monopoly will be to make short work of the Chinese question. Clear out the land-grabber and the Chinaman must go. Root the white race in the soil, and all the millions of Asia cannot dispossess it."

¹ "Why Work is Scarce, Wages Low, and Labour Restless," Metropolitan Temple, March 26, 1878.