

## NEWSPAPERMAN

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NEWS OF the assassination of Abraham Lincoln reached California when Henry George was working part time as a typesetter for the *Alta California*. It stirred him profoundly. And, not incidentally, it gave him his first opportunity to catch the public eye with the vigor and clarity of style which he had developed in his writing.

Vitally interested in public affairs, the young printer had watched admiringly the course taken by the Civil War president. He had come to revere this man for whom he had cast his first vote. While anger and grief over the tragedy surged through him, he raged with Isaac Trump and others against the "copperhead" newspapers which had attacked Lincoln so recklessly. He determined to join with his friend in leading an attack on the *News Letter*, a particularly virulent anti-Lincoln newspaper. But when he reached the *News Letter's* office, he found Trump already in command of a mob which was sacking the plant and flinging its contents into the street.

Merely witnessing the scene acted as a safety valve for George. His anger somewhat softened, he went home and wrote an article of some five hundred words which further relieved his feelings. This he slipped, unsigned, into the editorial box of the *Alta California*. The next day it appeared in print.<sup>1</sup> A few lines reveal its tenor:

*A man rushed to the front of the President's box, waving a long dagger in his right hand, exclaiming: "Sic semper tyrannis!"*

—*Alta* despatches, April 15, 1865.

What a scene these few words bring—vivid as the lightning flash that bore them! The glitter and glare, curving circle and crowded pit, flash of jewels and glinting of silks—and the blanched sea of upturned faces, the fixed and staring eyes, the awful hush—silence

of death! . . . They came to laugh at a comedy, and a tragedy is before them which will make a nation weep. . . .

While the world lasts will this scene be remembered. As a martyr of freedom—as the representative of justice in a great nation, the name of the victim will live forever; and the Proclamation of Emancipation, signed with the name and sealed with the blood of *Abraham Lincoln* will remain a landmark in the progress of the race.<sup>2</sup>

The editor of the *Alta California* sought out the author in the composing room and engaged him at once to write a description of the Lincoln mourning decorations in San Francisco.

This proved to be the first newspaper writing for which Henry George received pay. But reporting was not enough for him. He must express his emotions in a less impersonal form. In the little parlor of his home he wrote a eulogy of the dead President which was given the leading place on the editorial page the following day. He wrote of Lincoln:

He personified the best, the most general character of the people who twice called him to the highest place they could bestow, and the strength and the virtue of a nation, enriched by the best blood of all races, were his.

He was not of those whom God lifts to the mountain tops and who tell of his truth to ears that will not hear and show His light to eyes that cannot see—whom their own generation stone and future ones worship; but he was of the leaders who march close before the advancing ranks of the people, who direct their steps and speak with their voice. . . .

His was not the eloquence which sways men at will . . . yet in all he said there was the power, eloquent in its plainness and honesty, of a man truer than his pledge, better than his word. . . . And as in our times of need, the man that was needed came forth, let us know that it will always be so, and that under our institutions, when the rights of the people are endangered, from their ranks will spring the men for the times. . . .<sup>3</sup>

With peace restored in the nation, eyes in California turned abroad. The state had many sentimental ties with Mexico, the immediate source of much of her culture and of some of her population, and now the neighbor to the South was engaged in a struggle that claimed the allegiance of liberals everywhere. Napoleon III of France, in an attempt to get control of the rich lands of Mexico, had persuaded the Archduke Maximilian of

Austria, who was being importuned by Mexican exiles, to go to that country in 1864 and set himself up as emperor. The peons and all freedom-loving Mexicans weary of generations of foreign domination united themselves behind Benito Juarez and revolted against the Spanish pretender and his French mercenaries.

The resistance of the Mexican patriots strongly appealed to Henry George. He joined an expedition in San Francisco which was being organized to aid the fight for Mexican liberation. The editor of the *Alta California* was prepared to give George a contract for news letters about the expedition, and the fact that he would receive pay for this work was the final persuasion which he needed.

Although this meant separation for a time—and, if he did not return, perhaps widowhood and poverty for her—the wife, now twenty-one years old, consented to his going. When the time came for parting, Henry and Annie George knelt beside their sleeping babies and prayed together. Then the young husband and father joined the other members of the band of Mexican liberators at Platt's Hall.

He was to be first lieutenant of his company and John Hungerford (subsequently father-in-law of John Mackay), was to be the colonel. After much delay the expedition boarded the old barque *Brontes*. To their dismay, the adventurers found that the boat was ill provisioned and equipped with 10,000 condemned rifles, half a dozen saddles and a few casks of water. Some of the men were little less than pirates, and they were hatching a secret plan to seize a French transport. Luckily the Federal authorities got wind of the matter, arrested these plotters (the rest of the expedition was freed), and nipped the whole project in the bud.<sup>4</sup> Years later during a political campaign this experience was to lead to the charge in some newspapers that Henry George had once engaged in a piratical expedition.

This was the nearest George ever came to war. At the time he was bitterly disappointed that his campaign for Mexican freedom began and ended in San Francisco harbor. Later he was grateful when he realized that this particular expedition would have come to no good. But he did not let the matter rest there. He helped to establish the Monroe League (of which Annie George became the only woman member), which

was to send another expedition to aid the Mexican patriots. But this, too, failed.

Soon after the *Brontes* affair a typesetting position opened in Sacramento for official California state printing on a contract basis. George moved his family back to the city which they had left the year before. His small salary was sufficient for a modest living and the Georges remained in Sacramento this time for nearly a year. Henry became a member of a literary society known as the Sacramento Lyceum. At one of the meetings, after listening to a speech in favor of protection which was delivered by a land agent of the Central Pacific Railroad, George's economic beliefs were sharply reversed. "I was a protectionist when he [the speaker] began," he wrote later, "but when he got through I was a free-trader. If what he said was true, it seemed to me that the country that was hardest to get at must be the best country to live in; and that, instead of merely putting duties on things brought from abroad, we ought to put them on things brought from anywhere, and that fires and wars and impediments to trade were the very best things to levy on commerce."<sup>5</sup> This of course was ridiculous.

Although George was becoming more and more interested in public affairs, he found time after the day's work at the case to write and get published the account of the *Shubrick* sea burial, previously cited,<sup>6</sup> and a fanciful sketch entitled "The Prayer of Kohonah."<sup>7</sup>

In September of 1866, the new *San Francisco Times* offered George a job in its composing room and the family left Sacramento a second time. Henry had thought of writing a novel, but encouragement from James McClatchy, the *Times'* editor, led the young compositor to try his hand at editorial writing. When McClatchy left the paper after a brief stay, George's latest editorial was shown to the new editor, Noah Brooks, who later said, "The article was written in a neat, regular and small hand, with lines far apart, on sheets of buff paper such as was used for wrapping. It showed a largeness of thought that made me suspect that the young man had been borrowing." But, searching through current periodicals, Brooks found no sign of appropriation, so he printed the article. Then he looked up the author and saw "a slight young man, rather undersized, who stood on a board to raise him to the proper height to work at his case."<sup>8</sup> Though "not prepossessed with him,"<sup>9</sup> Brooks later invited George to write at the regular editorial col-

umn rates, and eventually engaged him as a full-time editorial writer.

Despite his height and slight build, Henry George had broad shoulders and a carriage of head and expression which were to command attention everywhere. His dark auburn hair had been heavy but now it was showing signs of thinning. His approaching baldness concerned Annie George, who frequently interspersed in her letters, when the two were separated, such admonitions as, "Do you take care of your hair? Don't neglect it on any account. . . . Have you had anything done for your hair? If you would rub it with glycerine, it would do you good."<sup>10</sup>

Evidently he neglected to use glycerine, for he grew steadily balder and his rapidly thinning hair became darker. His beard was several shades lighter and was what the Scots call "sandy." The grey-blue eyes, with their far gaze, were keener than ever. His small hands, with their tapering fingers and pink palms, clumsy with hammer or saw, were dexterous with ropes and boats and quick at the case. His feet were small in proportion to his height.

One day the husband and wife with their son, Henry, Jr., went together to buy shoes for the family. As they were leaving the store Mrs. George heard the man who had waited on them remark to another clerk, "Sure, not much to be made out of that crowd! Himself has a bye's fut, herself has a gurrl's fut, and as fur the child, he has no fut at all!"<sup>11</sup>

After seven months as typesetter, reporter, and editorial writer for the *San Francisco Times*, Henry George became managing editor at a salary of fifty dollars a week. He retained the position for more than a year. During this time he improved his writing style. He studied deeply the questions of the day which he discussed in his editorials: free trade, paper money, personal and proportional representation, public franchises, privileges in the Army, the Australian ballot, "women's rights," and many other topics.

This study equipped him to write an article for the celebrated new magazine, *The Overland Monthly*, whose chief contributors were Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Joaquin Miller. A seven-thousand-word article, "What the Railroads Will Bring Us," appeared in the October, 1868, issue and brought him forty dollars. It shows sharp traces of the trend in economic thought which he was to develop later. The new railroads, which had

received vast land grants and cash subsidies from the Federal government, and which seemed capable of extensive graft and corruption because of their involvement in politics, gave him pause. "Let us see whither we are tending," the article begins, continuing:

The completion of the railroad and the consequent great increase of business and population, will not be a benefit to all of us, but only to a portion. As a general rule (liable of course to exception) those who have, it will make wealthier; for those who *have not* it will make it more difficult to get. Those who have lands, mines, established business, special abilities of certain kinds, will become richer for it and find increased opportunities; those who have only their own labor will become poorer, and find it harder to get ahead.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of study and hard work, life had its lighter moments for Henry George. These included another and more direct contact with Mark Twain.

The author, hard up and in debt, came to Platt's Hall to deliver a lecture, the proceeds of which he hoped would pay his way East. But one of his creditors sent the sheriff to collect the money taken in at the gate, together with a gold watch with which Mark Twain had been presented at a testimonial dinner. Before the sheriff could seize the money, the author's friends "vamoosed" with the box office receipts while others, including Alec Bell and Henry George, passed the watch from one to another just a jump ahead of the sheriff. All of his confederates contrived to meet Mark Twain and give him his belongings when he was out of the county, on the ferry, bound for the railroad train in Oakland.<sup>13</sup>

Another child, Jane Teresa, named in honor of Henry's sister Jennie and Annie's sister Teresa, was born into the George household during the period of steady work on the *San Francisco Times*. When little Jane was one year old, Henry George decided to send his family on the long-dreamed-of journey to Philadelphia, for by that time he had saved enough money for the trip. They were put in charge of his brother Val who had, some months earlier, joined them in California.

The overland journey was not an easy one. The Pullman Company had started to build sleeping cars the year before (1867) but they were not yet to be found on all trains—even if one had money to pay for the luxury of using them. Sometimes,

on the long jumps, Mrs. George had to make a bed for the three children by putting the valises between two seats, with folded shawls for a mattress. One night, in a small country station, two tough-looking, tobacco-chewing miners boarded the train. Every seat was taken, and nearly every occupant, including Val George, was asleep. Realizing that her children were using more space than was their right, Mrs. George hurriedly began to shift them to make room for the newcomers. One of the miners quickly restrained her with his blackened hand. Doffing his rumpled hat, he said in a squeaky whisper, "Why, Ma'am, leave 'em lay! Don't disturb 'em. They're the purtiest things we seen since we left home over a year ago."

The two men feasted their eyes on the sleeping children: Harry, now five years old, with red hair and a sensitive face; merry little Dick with long blonde curls; and the tiny sister "Jen," her small head covered with ringlets of sun-yellow. After impressing the picture on their minds the men clumped down the aisle as lightly as their 'big boots would permit and stood until they reached their destination.<sup>14</sup>

Upon her arrival in Philadelphia, Mrs. George received a warm welcome from her husband's family. She wrote back to California that "Father sent Tom to New York to meet us. . . . In Philadelphia they all met us at the door, but Father took me out of the carriage and was the first to embrace me. . . . Harry darling, all is happiness around me, but I am not happy for 'my heart is over the sea.'" <sup>15</sup> Annie George wrote him of her embarrassment over the expenses of the journey, some of which she did not anticipate, and added, "The folks home here have no idea of our situation. I spoke of getting a new cloak when I first came and Mother wanted to know which I would get, 'cloth or velvet.' I said cloth by all means. It amused me more than a little. They were astonished when they saw my wardrobe. They all dress nicely, have all got silk dresses too, and none of them have any idea of the troubles we have been through." <sup>16</sup>

It must have been a comfort to Henry, who through the years had been straining to send money home to Philadelphia, to be told that "their poor times are nearly as good as our prosperous ones, so don't worry about them." <sup>17</sup>

A beautiful devotion grew up between Annie and her husband's father, but difference in religious creed seemed to raise a barrier between her and his mother. "If I was an Episcopa-

lian," Annie wrote Henry, "I think I would be all she would wish. . . . That I cannot be. I would not change my liberal opinion for any creed much as I respect it. I go to church with Mother or Aunt Mary every Sunday but being a Catholic in name is as bad as being practically a Catholic."<sup>18</sup>

With tact Annie managed to widen the horizon of the conservative household. Discovering that the boys secretly played cards outside of the home, she got permission to teach the game in the house and soon had the family indulging in "Old Maid" and "Casino" and even "Big Bonanza." In the same way she taught her young brothers and sisters-in-law to dance, first with pillows for partners, then with one another. But none of them had been "caught" early enough, for these pupils were not much credit to their teacher. With the help of Tom she bought a small melodeon on which all the younger members of the family practiced. (Mrs. George wrote a trifle naively to her son in California, "When they all become good players I will enjoy it more."<sup>19</sup>)

With her clever needle, Annie made a wedding dress of soft muslin, hemmed by hand with dozens of tiny ruffles, for her sister-in-law Kate. The girl was married to a young actor, Jared B. Chapman, whose father, William Chapman, had been for years the "low comedian" of the Walnut Street Theater in the time of Mrs. Drew and James Wallack. Jared Chapman was acting small parts in the same company when he met and fell in love with Catherine George, who was teaching school—"Kate" with the merry tongue and knee-length braids of red-gold hair. But so great was the consternation in the George household at the thought of the properly brought up girl marrying an actor that the very good actor (for that he was) gave up his profession to settle down to a sandy farm in New Jersey and become a very poor farmer. However, Jerry Chapman sometimes yearned so much for his lost art that he would steal off for a session with his makeup box and wigs and appear again at his own front door as an apparent stranger to accost his unsuspecting wife. On occasion she threatened to call her husband in from the fields to oust the obnoxious interloper before she discovered who he really was!

Meanwhile, in California, Henry George had left the *San Francisco Times* when a raise in pay he sought was not granted. He became managing editor of Charles De Young's new morning paper, *The Chronicle*. As soon as he was installed he con-



trived to have John Timmins, who four years earlier had discharged him from the *Sacramento Union*, made foreman of the composing room at *The Chronicle*.

But this connection lasted only a few weeks. George disapproved of De Young's policy. When an opportunity to go East was offered him, he seized it.

After eleven years' absence, Henry was going home to Philadelphia.