

Concluded from Last Month:

Henry George, The Scholar

By FRANCIS NEILSON

George pointed the moral which Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall* has placed before us. Our author, however, saw more deeply into the dissolution of the Roman State than any of his predecessors. Here is a passage which attracted the mind of as fine a Roman scholar as I have ever met, Romaine Paterson, who wrote *The Nemesis of Nations*, remarked that this passage put the reason for the decline of Roman civilization in a nutshell. The passage reads:

"The Roman civilization did not petrify as did the homogeneous civilizations where the strong bonds of custom and superstition that held the people in subjection probably also protected them, or at any rate kept the peace between rulers and ruled; it rotted, declined and fell. Long before Goth or Vandal had broken through the cordon of the legions, even while her frontiers were advancing, Rome was dead at the heart. Great estates had ruined Italy. Inequality had dried up the strength and destroyed the vigor of the Roman world. Government became despotism, which even assassination could not temper; patriotism became servility; vices the most foul flouted themselves in public; literature sank to puerilities; learning was forgotten; fertile districts became waste without the ravages of war—everywhere inequality produced decay, political, mental, moral, and material. The barbarism which overwhelmed Rome came not from without, but from within. It was the necessary product of the system which had substituted slaves and colonii for the independent husbandmen of Italy, and carved the provinces into estates of senatorial families."

The wealth of illustration, the platitude of example that George brings to bear upon evil economic conditions must impress any intellectual man with the fact that within a few years (perhaps eight or ten at most), he literally combed the histories of his time for the abundance of material he used. Indeed, he has made it easy for any young man of inquiring mind and persevering spirit to make of himself a well-informed individual in a fourth of the time that it took George to gather his knowledge.

The secret of George's success in this respect was that he was fearless. He had a job to do and it became his recreation. He never spared himself; no true scholar ever does. The man who knows his subject, once he determines to give expression to it, cannot help setting it down in clear terms, but as he applies himself to the task, he realizes that his statements must march in attractive garb. He must add color, imagery and those decorative arts of style which win the reader, fascinate him, persuade him to read on. Here is an example of the way in which George does it:

"... Occasionally, comes a straggling lecturer to open up glimpses of the world of science, of literature, or of art; in election times, come stump speakers, and the citizen rises to a sense of dignity and power, as the cause of empires is tried before him in the struggle of John Doe and Richard Roe for his support and vote. And, by and by, comes the circus, talked of months before, and opening to children whose horizon has been the prairie, all the realms of the imagination—princes and princesses of fairy tale, mail-clad crusaders and turbaned Moors, Cinderella's fairy coach, and the giants of nursery lore; lions such as crouched before Daniel, or in circling Roman amphitheater tore the saints of God; ostriches who recall the sandy deserts; camels such as stood around when the wicked brethren raised Joseph from the well and sold him into bondage; elephants such as crossed the Alps with Hannibal, or felt the sword of the Maccabees; and glorious music that thrills and builds in the chambers of the mind as rose the sunny dome of Kubla Khan."

A wide range of knowledge to provide attractive references, lively similes and striking examples to embellish the argument are important adjuncts to good writing; all these qualities are found in *Progress and Poverty*. What could be more apt than the quotation George takes from Sir William Jones:

"To whomsoever the soil at any time belongs, to him belong the fruits of it. White parasols, and elephants mad with pride are the flowers of a grant of land."

Sir William Jones was an orientalist and jurist, who wrote the *Sakuntala*. How Henry George found Jones' translation of a document setting down an Indian grant of land, mystifies me.

Take another example:

"The widow is gathering nettles for her children's dinner; a perfumed seigneur, delicately lounging in the *Ocell-de-Bœuf*, hath an alchemy whereby he will extract from her the third nettle, and call it rent."

This from Thomas Carlyle.

In Chapter II of the Fifth Book, he takes us back to Hallam, the historian, and he writes a few pages on the condition in England after the Black Death. He quotes from Hugh Latimer who was burned at Oxford; Latimer, the man who said:

"Play the man, Master Ridley. We shall well this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out!"

I think George must have read Green's *Short History of the English People*, for he refers to the Enclosure of Commons and the division of the Church lands, which were the causes of depopulating the countryside and raising the value of land. An amusing bit taken from Sir Henry Maine's *Indian Studies* reminds us of many occurrences which took place a few years ago, during the strikes in this country. George says:

"There is an ancient Hindoo mode of compelling the payment of a just debt, traces of something akin to which Sir Henry Maine has found in the laws of the Irish Brehons. It is called, sitting *dharna*—the creditor seeking enforcement of his debt by sitting down at the door of the debtor, and refusing to eat or drink until he is paid."

Then George remarks:

"Like this is the method of labor combinations. In their strikes, trades' unions sit *dharna*. But, unlike the Hindoo, they have not the power of superstition to back them."

One of the most remarkable evidences of George's scholarship is his references to the Classics. There are

many such in the book. He refers to the Olympian Games, Lycurgus, Themistocles, Plutarch, the Gracchi and numerous other personages as well as their laws, the crises through which they passed and, of course, the causes of their downfall. I realize fully that George refers to works—those of Guizot, the historian—which might have been books of reference, yielding, to a careful student, apt quotations from the Classics; but one must remember that the way in which George uses such material indicates that he had a much wider knowledge than what could have been gleaned from secondary sources. Perhaps this wealth of material spurred him on to go to the sources direct. At any rate, he shows clearly that he is always on safe ground, and gives one a sense of security which comes with the faith that he knows what he is doing and the object at which he is aiming.

Towards the end of the book he becomes prophetic to a singular degree. He says:

"This truth involves both a menace and a promise. It shows that the evils arising from the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth, which are becoming more and more apparent as modern civilization goes on, are not incidents of progress, but tendencies which must bring progress to a halt; that they will not cure themselves, but, on the contrary, must, unless their cause is removed, grow greater and greater, until they sweep us back into barbarism by the road every previous civilization has trod."

The book is as fresh and sound in idea as if it had been published yesterday. The conditions with which it deals are the conditions in which we live today. The principles it examines are as ancient as the toils of man and as true today as ever they were. The primary factors in production, which governed the activities of the Peking man, govern those of every person of our time. Land, the passive factor; labor, the active factor; and capital, the assisting factor, remain unchanged, no matter how much stupid governments attempt to change that which must persist. Every clear-headed person knows that a tax on wealth reduces purchasing power; diminishes demand for labor products, discour-

ages initiative and penalizes improvement. No matter what history into which we delve, whether that of the anthropologist or of the archaeologist, or, indeed, that of the ancient recorders (as I have attempted to show in *The Eleventh Commandment*), one finds conclusive evidence and perfect corroboration of the Georgian philosophy. It is academic cowardice and laziness which defraud the young in our colleges and universities of the boons to clear thinking which George gives us in *Progress and Poverty*.

How many works have been given to us of this generation, which emphasize in an extraordinary manner the thought that was in George's mind! To mention only two—both from Germans—we had Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and Egon Friedell's *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*. These men, from different points of view, arrived at George's conclusion.

We have been led astray. False prophets, false doctors of philosophy, spurious historians have done their dirty work since the middle of the sixteenth century. The Renaissance was not a new birth; it was merely a feeble attempt to revive Classicism. It failed because it was bound to fail. Although the Humanists deluded themselves into thinking that salvation was to be found in ephemeral schemes for the educative betterment of man, they failed to realize that man was a land animal and that he could not live or work without land. Steadily we have seen the deterioration of all those prime motives which moved Henry George so deeply. Religion, as it was understood for many centuries, has been abandoned and, in its place, the sociologists have presented to us a religion of daily affairs. We are told to bow down before the people and acknowledge their greatness. Well, we have been bowing down for a long time and, instead of becoming convinced that the people *en masse* are great, many of us are coming to the conclusion that they have nothing like the wit which their uneducated predecessors used every day of their lives. To turn a Bible phrase to our use: "Chris-

tianity has gone a-whoring after false gods."

Yet, another revolution is taking place. The physicists, the biologists, the archaeologists and, indeed, some of the anthropologists are finding, in their attempts to solve the great riddles of the universe, that they cannot dispense with God, the Creator, the beneficent Father who provided the earth for His children. In recent years I have read many books which have convinced me that a new light is penetrating the minds of scientists—a light not yet traveling at the rate of 186,000 miles per second, but traveling all the same. Two books have been published in recent years, which would have brought joy to the heart of Henry George: one by a great scientist, Gustaf Stromberg, *The Soul of the Universe*; the other, called *God*, and written by America's only philosopher, John Eloy Boodin.

It is never too late—not even at this hour, when Europe is struck with the most mortal of all mad diseases, and America is preparing to be struck in a similar way: it is never too late—to return to First Principles. A mighty effort is called for to rehabilitate mankind on an economic basis. This effort calls for freedom—freedom to use the earth, freedom to produce, freedom to do legitimately what one desires with its produce; to enjoy the gifts of the Creator and, enjoying, know the relaxations which man needs to furnish his mind with thoughts of peace and kindness, to inspire his soul with the highest ideals.