

HENRY GEORGE UNORTHODOX

A depression was on in the year 1864. In those days depressions did not go by their Latin name as a rule, except when people wanted to put on airs about them, but were called by the simple English name of hard times. This streak of hard times lay very heavily on the Pacific Coast. It was aggravated by a great drouth that burned up the grain crop and pasturage, and killed most of the cattle on the ranches. There was no business in farming or ranching, industries were closed down, and commerce was at a dead halt.

At this time Henry George was twenty-five years old, living miserably in San Francisco, where, after a long struggle with misfortune, he had set up in a small way as a job printer. He had a wife and child, and his wife was shortly to give birth again. He could get no work, whether at printing or anything else, nor could he ask help from any one, for all the people he knew were wretchedly poor. Long afterward, speaking of this period, he said that as things went from bad to worse—

"I came near starving to death, and at one time I was so close to it that I think I should have done so but for the job of printing a few cards which enabled us to buy a little corn meal. In this darkest time in my life my second child was born."

When this event happened he had no money, no food, no way to provide his wife with any care; he was alone in a bare lodging with a helpless suffering woman and a newborn baby. In a desperate state of mind he left the house and took to the last resort of the destitute.

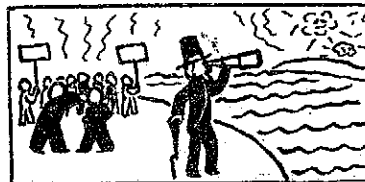
"I walked along the street and made up my mind to get money from the first man whose appearance might indicate that he had it to give. I stopped a man, a stranger, and told him I wanted five dollars. He asked what I wanted it for. I told him that my wife was confined and that I had nothing to give her to eat. He gave me the money. If he had not, I think I was desperate enough to have killed him."

Henry George had seen depressions before. When he was sixteen years old he saw one in Australia, where he lay in port for a month

(This brilliant portrait of the great American economist and social philosopher will appear in four parts in consecutive issues. It is reprinted, by permission, from Scribner's Magazine, at the request of many admirers of both Henry George and Albert Jay Nock—and if interest in this article justifies the expense it will be reproduced in pamphlet form.)

as foremast-boy on an old East Indiaman sailing out of New York for Melbourne and Calcutta. There he found times "very hard ashore, thousands with nothing to do and nothing to eat." Two years later, in 1875, another depression threw him out of work in Philadelphia and sent him wandering to the Pacific Coast. After 1864, too, he was to be wrecked by still another depression, when the appalling hard times which followed the panic of 1873 broke up in succession two newspaper enterprises which had employed him, and he was once more set adrift and penniless.

Thus it was that the question occurred to him, why do these depressions happen? Why should there be any hard times? Nobody seemed to know. People took depressions as they took tuberculosis or typhoid, or as people in the Middle Ages took the bubonic plague, as something bound to happen, something that had to be put up with. They had always happened about once every so often, undoubtedly would always go on happening, and that was that. Yet in the nature of things there seemed no reason why they should happen. There was plenty of natural opportunity for everybody, plenty of everything that anybody could possibly need. The country was not poor and overpopulated—far from it. On the contrary, it was fabulously rich and had only a thin and straggling popu-



lation. Nevertheless, every so often, with a strange regularity, hard times came around and vast masses of the people were left without work and without bread.

There must be some reason for this which no one had as yet discovered, and Henry George made up his mind that if he lived he would find out what it was.

Somehow he did manage to live. By one means or another he got over the peak of his greatest distress, and four years later, in the winter of 1868, he came from California to New York on an errand for a newspaper. He was then not quite thirty years old, and did not even yet have a dollar in his pocket that he could call his own. New York showed him something brand-new in his experience. Up to this time he had not been in a position to see any great show of inequality in the distribution of wealth. Life was simple in the Philadelphia of his boyhood days, and in the rough and new California of his youth one person lived much like another. But now, in New York of 1868, he saw our western Palmyra in all the shoddy glory of its post-war period, and by all accounts it must have been a most dreadful sight, as repulsive as the pens of Dickens and George William Curtis pictured it. Shoddy riches, shoddy show, shoddy ideals and taste, shoddy people—and on the other hand, whole populations of troglodyte slum-dwellers living at an almost inconceivable depth of wretchedness and degradation.

Years afterward George said that here "I saw and recognized for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want." What was the cause of it? Again, nobody seemed to know. Like depressions and plagues, it was taken as part of the regular order of nature. It had always existed in large commercial and industrial centers, apparently it was bound always to exist, and it seemed to be just another one of the things that had to be put up with. There was no cure for it, so far as anybody knew. All that could be done was to take some of the curse off it by charity of one sort or another, and this was being done; in fact, it was beginning to be organized on a large scale,

AMERICAN by Albert Jay Nock

more lavishly perhaps than in any other country.

Nevertheless, George reasoned with himself, the thing had to have a cause, for nothing in nature ever happens without a cause. If that cause could be found, a cure might be found; but trying to deal with an effect without knowing anything about its cause would be mere fumbling in the dark. Here, then, was a second question, to which George pledged his lifetime for an answer. The first question was, what is the cause—not any superficial and apparent cause, but the true fundamental cause—of recurrent industrial depressions? The second question was, what is the true fundamental cause of the enormous inequality in the distribution of wealth?

George succeeded in answering these two questions to his own satisfaction while he was still a comparatively young man. This was the only success he ever had in his life; whatever else he touched failed. His one success, however, such as it was, led him through one of the strangest and most remarkable careers ever achieved in America, or for that matter, in the world.

II

In principle, as the politicians say, Henry George's boyhood followed the course laid out by the story-books that used to be written around the romance of American life. He did not exactly run away from school or run away to sea, but he did what came to the same thing. He served notice on his parents so firmly that they decided to let him have his own way. In the matter of schooling they perhaps thought it was just as well, for he seems to have been an all-round failure at any kind of book-learning. Between the ages of six and fourteen he tried his luck at four different schools, three of them private schools, and all of them first-rate as schools went in those days—and probably they went about as well then as they do now—but he was not worth his salt at any of them. He worried through the grammar grades, entered the high school, stuck at it almost half a year, and then struck his colors for good and all; he never had another day's schooling.

He said afterward, rather austere-ly, that in his half year at the high school he "was idle, and wasted time." He may have done so, but if he did it was exceptional, for as boy or man he was never shiftless or dissipated, but always a hard worker, with an uncommon amount of intellectual curiosity and scientific imagination. The worst of him was that he was hasty and impatient, and of a roaming, restless disposition which probably made his parents think that his best hope of getting any kind of discipline lay in the fore-castle, and that since he wanted most of all to go to sea, it might be the best thing for him if they should let him go.

One matter connected with this period in his life is worth notice. When he was forty years old, he suddenly appeared before the world as the master of a superb English prose style, a style that very few writers have equalled. Everybody of any literary experience at once began to wonder where in the world he could have got it, and how, and when. His record was open. With virtually no schooling, he had been a sailor, a typesetter, a tramp, a peddler, printer, shopclerk, newspaperman, weigher in a rice-mill, ship's steward, inspector of gas meters, gold-seeker, farm laborer. There was clearly nothing in any of these pursuits, or in all of them put together, to raise a man's prose style to that high level. How did he come by it?

It is usually said that he learned to write by hard practice, mainly between 1865 and 1870, and it is true that his actual career as a writer began in that period. But he did not get his style then, for he always had it. Scraps of a diary that he kept on shipboard show that he wrote the same clear, precise, and beautiful English at seventeen that he did at forty. For example:

"Wed. 11. I was roused out of a sound sleep at twelve o'clock to come



on deck and keep my watch. On turning out I found a great change in the weather. The wind had shifted to N.W., and come out cold and fierce. The ship was running dead before it in a S.E. direction, making about eight or nine knots an hour. After keeping a cold and dreary watch until four A.M., we were relieved. . . . In the afternoon all hands were engaged in getting the anchors on the fore-castle and securing them for a long voyage. The color of the sea is green on sounding, the shade varying according to the depth of water, and a beautiful blue outside; and so very clear that objects can be seen at a great depth."

Or this, which any critic would pass unquestioned as having been written by R. H. Dana—

"The wind, which had been strong from aft the day before, during the middle watch died away and was succeeded by a calm until eight A.M., when a stiff breeze from the south sprang up, accompanied by shadows of rain. At twelve M. all hands were called to reef. While reefing the fore-topsail, the parrel of the yard gave way, causing a great deal of trouble and keeping all hands from dinner. It was two-thirty P.M. before our watch got below to their plum-duff, which had been allowed in honour of the day. The rest of the day was rainy, with wind constantly varying, keeping us hauling on the braces. Thus closed the most miserable Fourth of July that I have ever yet spent."

When a boy of seventeen turns off such English as that, day after day, for his own eye only, no one should be surprised at what he does for the public eye at forty. It is not easy to hit just that blend of precision, clearness, simplicity and grace—let the reader try it. George never wrote a sentence that needed a second reading to tell not only what it meant; but the only thing it could possibly mean, or be made to mean. In this respect he stands with the most formidable champion of the established order that he ever had to face—Professor Huxley—and with all its force and clearness and precision, his style has also a grace of warmth and color which Huxley's has not.

But as George himself would have said, a man's style must come from

somewhere, it must have a cause. A person is not simply born knowing how to do that sort of thing. More probably he got it from the kind of English that he was brought up to hear and speak at home, and from his familiarity with the English of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. Such of the family's letters as exist are extremely well written, and his schoolmates and cronies—Bishop Henry C. Potter and his brother, Bishop Horstmann, James Morgan Hart, Doctor R. Heber Newton and his brother—were certainly bred to have a decent respect for their native tongue, so in all probability George heard excellent English from his infancy. His father was a vestryman of old St. Paul's, who brought up his children in the strict ways of old-style Evangelical Protestantism, with the result that Henry seems to have known the King James Version practically by heart, so that his own English may have been modelled, more or less consciously, on its narrative style.

He went to sea in April, 1855, and his voyage on the "Hindoo" lasted a year and two months. She was an old wooden affair of 600 tons, in none too good shape, bought second-hand for a kind of tramp service after twenty-five years of hard wear and tear as an East Indiaman. She went out of New York in lumber for Melbourne. The record is that she carried half a million feet, which seems close to an overload for a ship of her tonnage—an awkward cargo, at any rate. She took a deal of tinkering, as the passage just quoted from George's journal shows. Before she was a week out her tiller broke in half, rotted at the core, but fortunately the sea was calm enough to let the crew fix tackles on the rudder to steer by, while the carpenter rigged a new gear. Except for incidents like this, and a few days' stretch of heavy weather in the Indian Ocean, the voyage was uneventful, enabling George to learn the sailor's trade in as easy circumstances, probably, as he could have had. His captain seems to have been a very good sort, who saw to it that the crew got as decent treatment as the state of the ship allowed.

George did not go ashore much, though the "Hindoo" lay off Melbourne nearly a month. He looked the town over once, and did not care for it. This was three years after the gold rush of 1852, and a "readjustment" had set in—in plain language, hard times—which made

everything look down at the heel. All the people he saw were poor, idle, and dejected. Calcutta also disappointed him. He did his duty by the scenery up the river, finding it very fine, and he took in the features of native life that seemed quaint to an American eye, the bamboo huts, home-made earthenware, the strange shape of the river-boats, some of which, he wrote, "had sails to help them along, in which there were more holes than threads." He noticed the handsome country residences of the rich English living on both sides of the river, and also, by way of contrast, the number of corpses floating downstream in all stages of decomposition, covered with obscene black birds picking them to pieces. "The first one I saw filled me with horror and disgust," he wrote, "but like the natives, you soon cease to pay any attention to them."

Altogether it was not quite the India that a boy dreams of at a distance. He found it, as he afterwards said, "a land where the very carrion birds are more sacred than human life." A brief look at things ashore was enough for him, and when the "Hindoo" had got her thousand tons of rice aboard, he was glad to leave the land and go back on the open sea. He had sailor's blood in his veins, by his father's side of the family, two generations back, which may have given him something of the true sailor's virtuoso spirit. At the end of a year's voyage, although looking forward eagerly to seeing his family and friends in Philadelphia, he wrote in his journal, "Oh, that I had it to go over again."

The sea was not through with him, however. After the reunion with his people was over, the next thing was to cast about for something to do. His father got him a place with a printing firm to learn typesetting, where he stayed nine months, long enough to become a good journeyman compositor, and then quit in consequence of a row with his foreman. He had an offer from another firm, but the pay was nothing worth thinking of, and he did not take it. The

depression of 1857 was coming on, and the few employers who had a place open were offering sweatshop terms. Finding that there was simply nothing doing in Philadelphia, he went to Boston, working his way on a topmast schooner that carried coal. There was nothing doing there either; so, on his return, attracted by reports of the fortunes being made on the Pacific Coast, he shipped on the lighthouse-tender "Shubrick," which was going on the long voyage around the foot of South America, for service out of San Francisco.

While learning his new trade of typesetting in Philadelphia, he took lessons at night in penmanship and bookkeeping, with useful results. When his handwriting was fully formed, it was small and highly characteristic, but very clear and neat. Part of his father's idea in having him learn to set type was to improve his spelling. Like some other great writers, notably Count Tolstoy, he could not spell. This branch of the mechanics of writing seems to call for some obscure kind of natural gift or aptitude, which George never had. He thought typesetting helped him a little, but it could not have helped him much, for he misspelled even the commonest words all his life.

While he was working at the case, too, there happened one of those trivial incidents that turn out to be important in setting the course of one's life. He heard an old printer say that in a new country wages are always high, while in an old country they are always low. George was struck by this remark and on thinking it over, he saw that it was true. Wages were certainly higher in the United States than in Europe, and he remembered that they were higher in Australia than in England. More than this, they were higher in the newer parts than in the older parts of the same country—higher in Oregon and California, for instance, than in New York and Pennsylvania.

George used to say that this was the first little puzzle in political economy that ever came his way. He did not give it any thought until long after; in fact, he says he did not begin to think intently on any economic subject until conditions in California turned his mind that way. When finally he did so, however, the old printer's words came back to him as a roadmark in his search for the cause of industrial depressions, and the cause of inequality in the distribution of wealth.

