CHAPTER 2

GEORGE'S YOUTH AND EARLY CAREER

Henry George was born on September 2, 1839 in Philadelphia, into a moderately poor, high-minded Episcopalian family. His mother was a former school teacher of English descent, the father, a publisher of religious books. There were daily prayers and Scripture readings; on Sundays the whole family including eight children and a maiden aunt trooped to hear an evangelical pastor. Theater-going, cards and dancing were forbidden in the pious household, but the mother loved to recite poetry, and Shakespeare and books of travel and history were discussed. Constant readings of passages from the Bible gave Henry an early insight into the power and simplicity of a great literary style.

A liberating influence in the constricted Victorian milieu was the tradition of the sea. The boy spent hours on the wharves of Philadelphia, then still an important foreign port. His paternal grandfather had been a British-born sea captain, and marine stories told him by his father rang in his ears as he went down to the docks and spoke with the sailors there. Missionaries from afar stopped at the George home; the bookshelves held seafaring tales.

When he was nine years old, Henry entered the Episcopal Academy, but three years later was unhappy there, and prevailed on his family to allow him to leave. There followed a half-year of tutoring in private, which he enjoyed, and an even briefer period at the public high school. At the age of thirteen

he left school, never to return to any formal education. His father, no longer doing well in the church-book business, had returned to a lesser job in the Customs House, and Henry as eldest son felt he should eke out the family income with small jobs of his own.

If his official schooling had ended, his lifelong, ardent self-education had only begun. In the public library and at the famous Franklin Institute he read absorbedly, with a catholic taste. Science, poetry, novels smuggled into his home, and especially history, interested him. He made lists of British sovereigns, American presidents, the territories of Europe; Emerson, Franklin, Aristophanes, Byron figured in his conversation and diaries. With some friends he formed a society to consider "poetry, economics and Mormonism" (the last of which he vehemently disapproved of.) This early adoption of independent study as a substitute for academic training gave him a lasting preference for the former.

At fifteen he wanted to sail to the Orient as an apprentice seaman. Since he was self-reliant, restless and stable, his father thought it wise to consent. A ship captained by a friend of the family was setting forth for Australia and India, and Henry went aboard as foremast-boy, for a voyage of fifteen months.

His parents, sister, aunt, even his school chum, wrote him letters of prayerful solicitude for their "dear sailor boy." Henry seems to have been healthily resistant to too tender a concern; his replies, affectionate enough, were not much more than eager, factual notations of wind, weather and the techniques of seamanship. Only occasionally were there vivid passages anticipatory of his later eloquent literary power. He was a little disillusioned by the East, which was less magical and more unemployment-ridden than he had supposed.

Upon his return he learned the printer's trade, at which he grew proficient. Unemployment in his home state and the lure of a probable job out West impelled him to work his way, by boat, out to California. In San Francisco, which he characterized as "a dashing place, rather faster than Philadelphia," he had a hard time of it. Depression was hitting there too, and the job proved chimerical. In the northern part of the state,

whither he went in a futile search for gold, he worked in a miner's supply store, and as weigher in a rice field, finally hoboing back to San Francisco.

A picture of him at this time shows him with deep set eyes, clean-shaven, handsome and independent looking—necessarily quite different from the standard bearded photographs of his later years.

In San Francisco, he met and courted Annie Fox, an orphaned Catholic girl of a good Australian family. Since her guardian uncle, disapproving of the impecuniousness of her suitor, had forbidden him the house, she and Henry were wed suddenly and secretly, without benefit of dowry or honeymoon. It turned out to be a strong, happy marriage. The penniless girl grew into a woman of charm and character, lightening the atmosphere whenever her husband was in an abstracted mood, and bearing equally well the demands of his success and of his poverty.

The poverty during the first part of their life together proved intense. Henry had borrowed a suit of clothes and money for the wedding; at five the next morning he rose to look for work as a substitute typesetter. Three weeks later he and his wife left for Sacramento, where he had a printer's job on a paper for three years. This relatively halcyon period ended when he high-spiritedly quarreled with the boss and could find no other such work in the economic deflation of 1864. Having lost his savings in some mining stock, he tried peddling clothes-wringers, then set up an unsuccessful job-printing office of his own.

He pondered much on the desirability of wealth, or "at least more of it than I have at present." No wonder it was sought by all means, when its presence meant the ability to develop one's talents and to minister to the wants of those one loved, and its absence "crushes down all the noblest yearnings."

"I am not one of those who love work for its own sake," he wrote his sister, "but feeling what it brings I love it, and am happiest when hard at it."[1] Sometimes, he said, he wished he might retire from the jostlings of civilized life to the dim, blue hillsides, "but alas, money, money, money is needed even for that! It is our fate, we must struggle—and so here's for the strife!"[2]

The beginning of 1865, when he was twenty-four years old, was a black time. In his diary are found homely self-admonishments: "To cultivate habits of determination, energy and industry." "To make every cent I can." "To stay at home less, and be more social." A listing of expenses read: "Bread 10 cents, coffee .40, meat .20, paper .10, lunch .15—totaling .95."[3]

In January when the second of their children was born, there was nothing to eat in the house save a loaf of bread brought by a neighbor. "The mother is starving—feed her!" the doctor ordered. George went out, accosted the first well-dressed man he met, and asked him for five dollars. The stranger gave it; later George said that if he had not, he thought he was desperate enough to have killed him.[4]

For a month he was in near despair. "I have been unsuccessful in everything. . . . Am in very desperate plight. Courage. . . . Don't know what to do," he wrote on three consecutive days. On March 3rd there was the succinct entry: "At work"; he was setting type on a newspaper again.[5]

Poverty in its starkest shape had lifted, but it was to return in moderate form throughout his life, leaving an indelible mark on his understanding of the world.

"You do not know and I cannot readily tell you how much this little accommodation has been to me," he once wrote, on repaying a twenty-dollar loan to a rich friend. "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."[6]

He was by nature a sensitive family man, devoted to his wife and four children. Once he taxied all afternoon all over town, looking for the right person to mend Rose, his daughter Anna's broken doll. The reading-aloud and hymn-singing which had been part of his childhood he reintroduced at his own hearth. Perhaps in his solemn moods he could seem to a child deceptively austere. Anna later recounted that, when little, she trembled a little whenever he spoke to her alone—which can hardly have been his intention.

There was never any such misunderstanding with his wife, to whom after twenty-three years of marriage he was to write:

"I not only love you with all the fervor I did when I first clasped you to my heart, but with a deeper love. I have learned to respect your judgment and value your advice: your caresses, if they cannot seem more sweet, seem more needed, and even when you assume the imperious tone and art of the mistress there is a charm I would not feel from anyone else. I think the people who grow tired of each other are never truly married. There is in the perfect confidence and the absolute oneness of the truly married something which far surpasses any fresh charm."[7]

The spring of 1865 provided a turning point in George's career.

He had cast his first vote for Lincoln, and regretted that he couldn't fight in the Civil War. But going East would have been too expensive, and nothing of any real use was being done in California.

The President's sudden death brought into the open a nascent capacity on the part of the young printer. He had been striving to develop his literary powers, had composed essays for practice, and had managed to get a story published in a magazine. Deeply aroused by the assassination, he now wrote an impassioned account of what must have been the scene that night at Ford's Theatre, and slipped it, unsigned, into the editor's box. It was printed as the lead editorial in the *Alta California* of April 17, 1865, and was followed within a week by a soberer eulogy from the same source:

"No common man, yet the qualities which made him great and loved were eminently common. 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 virtues of a nation enriched by the best blood of all races, were his . . .

"No other system could have produced him; through no crowd of courtiers could such a man have forced his way. . . . And, as in our time 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. . . . Let us thank

God for him; let us trust God for him; let us place him in that Pantheon which no statue of a tyrant ever sullied—the hearts of a free people."[8]

The editor sought out the anonymous contributor and gave him work other than printing to do. This started George on a career of journalism which was to last about ten years. He rose rapidly in the California newspaper world: after stints as reporter, free-lance contributor and editorial writer for several publications, he became in 1867, at twenty-seven, managing editor of the *San Francisco Times*.

This radical Republican paper was progressive in many respects and George felt psychologically at ease in his new authority. He was a competent, prolific journalist, combining great capacity for thoroughness in everyday work with a sweeping, imaginative interest in social questions.

Free trade was the first important issue to engage his attention. As early as 1866, at the end of a lecture in favor of protectionism, he arose to disagree, saying that tariffs fostered antagonism between nations, while free trade was an evolutionary force that promoted understanding and peace.

Already he was coming to the conviction that there was a divine purpose in the way society develops, and that the relation of ethics to economics was intrinsic. The fact that different places were best fitted to produce diverse substances necessary to man, to him had teleological connotations:

"The world in which we find ourselves is not merely adapted to intercommunication," he was to write, "but what it yields to man is so distributed as to compel people of different localities to trade with each other. These endless diversities . . . show that nature has not intended man to depend for the supply of his wants upon his own production, but to exchange with his fellows."[9]

It was at a free trade meeting that he met Governor Haight, the Democratic governor of California, who enlisted the young editor's support in fighting the evil crescendo of the railroad monopoly. Those were the days of the building of the transcontinental lines, whose overlords included the "Big Four:"

Leland Stanford, Charles Croker, Mark Hopkins and Colis Huntington. They secured large government subsidies and also were given huge tracts of land adjacent to the line, not needed for the actual roadbed. Economic and political power fed upon each other: the railway magnates bribed legislators, underbid competing ship and stagecoach transportation till it failed, then charged exorbitant freight rates. Land went up in price, and small homeowners had difficulty in securing it.

Besides crusading against this situation in the *San Francisco Times,* George wrote two articles on it which drew attention. The first, "What the Railroad Will Bring Us" appeared in the *Overland Monthly,* a magazine that also published Bret Harte and Mark Twain. George claimed that the advent of the transcontinental lines would help established business but make the poor man's lot harder. The second article, circulated as Democratic campaign literature in 1871, condemned railroad subsidies, asking instead for government control of the lines.

In 1871, having left the *Times* because he thought his salary too low, he founded the *Daily Evening Post.* The land question which was to develop into his life work had begun to engage his attention, and at first he went along with the homestead policy, which meant making small acreages available at fair prices. But he soon grew dissatisfied with this practice which was not being applied justly anyway, and turned to a tentative solution of his own. It loomed large in his editorials: some called it "little Harry George's hobby." He advised taxing all land, assessed at its true selling value, with higher rates for large landholders.

The *Post* grew into an effective reform sheet under his editorship. He attacked civic corruption of all kinds: bribery in elections, bad conditions in the city hospital, almshouse and prison. Written exposé was not always enough for him: when three sailors were driven to suicide by their captain's brutality, George drew up a legal charge that resulted in the captain being put in jail. He disclosed the connivance of the police with the gambling saloons, and there were episodes when he needed physical as well as moral courage. He pressed for the investigation of a cruelly-run boys' Reform School, though when he arrived, the superintendent stood at the gate, pistol in hand.

A long array of current issues occupied him, with his usually taking the progressive side (his stance against Chinese immigration was the exception.) Monopolies in news service as well as in transportation were targets of his attack. He also advocated the eight-hour working day—a novelty at the time; and he pressed for free public libraries, becoming a founder and enthusiastic first secretary of the one in San Francisco.[10]

Decades before it became a noticeable question he was for equal pay for women. Probably his sense of justice would in any event have made him feel that one-half the human race should not be treated as inferior, but here his social views were reinforced by his personal life. For he looked upon Annie George as his equal in every way, respected her mentality as much as he loved her character, and habitually consulted her on his work.[11]

The *Post* was Democratic but mildly so, favoring a fusion of liberal, reform elements in both parties. George distrusted bureaucracy in whatever field, and advocated states' rights and home rule, emphasizing a certain amount of decentralization as necessary for idealistic, responsible government.

During this youthful period his religious feeling crystallized into what it was to be for the rest of his life. Although he had joined the Methodist church at the persuasion of two young friends, as far as churchgoing went this played as little part in his life as had the Episcopalian church of his parents—except to get married in. His religion was an inward matter, based on a deep faith in the beneficence of God, and a conviction that to be truly Christian meant to follow God's laws of justice in social as in personal affairs. He was critical of many of the churches around him in San Francisco, holding that they neglected one of their chief functions: seeing to it that men's social actions conformed to the divine will. In his newspaper work, he brought moral criteria to bear on current issues.

Successful as it was for four years, in 1875 the plant of the *Post* was overextended just as hard times were setting in. George was forced to sell out to a wealthy partner. He felt badly about it, but rallied.

"If I never do anything more I have the satisfaction of know-

ing I perceptibly affected public thought . . ." he wrote. "It is all in a lifetime, and I have seen too much to think I can certainly tell what is good and what is evil fortune."[12]

Soon he was installed as state inspector of gas meters by the Democratic governor his paper had helped elect. This sinecure enabled him to forego other regular work, and to write *Progress and Poverty*.