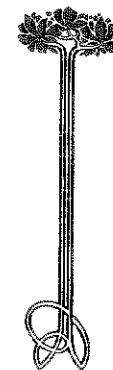


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# The Prophet of San Francisco

BY LOUIS F. POST



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## The Prophet of San Francisco

MANY an epithet flung in derision clings with honor, and that which the Duke of Argyle applied to Henry George is not an exception. Among those whose minds have grasped the economic principles to which this distinguished American appealed, and whose hearts have throbbed with the high moral purpose of his prophetic crusade, no name for him is cherished with more affection than the learned Duke's ungracious epithet — "The Prophet of San Francisco."

Like the prophets of Israel, Henry George warned a corrupted civilization that it must mend its ways or perish. Like them he proclaimed anew the immutable decree that mankind must conform to the laws of righteousness or suffer the natural consequences of unrighteousness. Listen to his warning cry:

"The fiat has gone forth! With steam and electricity, and the new powers born of progress, forces have entered the world that will either compel us to a higher plane or overwhelm us, as nation after nation, as civilization after civilization, have been overwhelmed before. It is the delusion which precedes destruction that sees in the popular unrest with which the civilized world is feverishly pulsing only the passing effects of ephemeral causes. Between democratic ideas and the aristocratic adjustments of society there is an irreconcilable conflict. Here in the United States, as there in Europe, it may be seen arising. We cannot go on permitting men to vote and forcing them to tramp. We cannot go on educating boys and girls in our public schools and then refusing them the right to earn an honest living. We cannot go on prating of the inalienable rights of man and then denying the inalienable right to the bounty of the Creator. Even now, in old bottles

the new wine begins to ferment, and elemental forces gather for the strife!"\*

That was the burden of his prophecy on the darker side. It was upon the brighter side, however, that he laid his emphasis. The splendid climax of all his preaching was the inspiring lesson that conformity to the laws of righteousness also has natural consequences, and that these are like gifts from the gods. With the warning prelude just quoted, the thought of the prophet begins to mount as a brighter prospect comes within his vision. "But!" he joyously exclaims—and then, while a shadow of doubt passes before the hopeful picture, he lingers a moment upon a questioning "if"—"but if, while there is yet time, we turn to Justice and obey her, if we trust Liberty and follow her, the dangers that now threaten must disappear, the forces that now menace will turn to agencies of elevation. Think of the powers now wasted; of the infinite fields of knowledge yet to be explored; of the possibilities of which the wondrous inventions of this century give us but a hint. With want destroyed; with greed changed to noble passions; with the fraternity that is born of equality taking the place of the jealousy and fear that now array men against each other; with mental power loosed by conditions that give to the humblest comfort and leisure; and who shall measure the heights to which our civilization may soar? Words fail the thought! It is the Golden Age of which poets have sung and high-raised seers have told in metaphor! It is the glorious vision which has always haunted man with gleams of fitful splendor. It is what he saw whose eyes at Patmos were closed in a trance. It is the culmination of Christianity—

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\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "Progress and Poverty," page 548.

the City of God on earth, with its walls of jasper and its gates of pearl! It is the reign of the Prince of Peace!"\*

With that prophetic utterance on his lips, Henry George came up out of San Francisco to excite the petulance of a Scottish duke, whilst awakening the civilized world to a consciousness of its most deadly communal sin. And seldom have prophets preached with the brilliancy and force of this one. Into open minds he carried conviction wherever he secured attention. Yet his rare faculty of vitalizing precise thought with eloquent expression exposed him to a cross-fire of criticism. Some readers who enjoyed the charm of his composition but were unaccustomed to exact thinking, feared the hypnotic effect of his style, and in self-defense objected vaguely but loftily to his argument; on the other hand were those schooled in close thinking but with a Gradgrindish contempt for sentiment, who often evaded his argument by condemning his adoption of a popular literary style for a scientific subject. Then again, there were the pop-gun critics who seemed to think him properly scorned as a writer because he sometimes split an infinitive, and utterly confounded as a reasoner because he did it on purpose. But these criticisms were only temporary annoyances. Like the contemptuous protest of the noble author of "The Reign of Law" (excited by solicitude for what George afterward called his "trumpety title and patch of ground") they have not so much as impeded the steady march of George's ideas along the broad highway of common thought.

Though the Duke's unwelcome prophet had come up out of San Francisco, the man himself hailed from Philadelphia. He was born within half a mile of Independence Hall, Septem-

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\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "Progress and Poverty," page 549.

ber 2, 1839. At that time John Stuart Mill, at whose feet he almost literally sat in his logical and economic studies, was about entering his 34th year; while Adam Smith, the father of the classical system of political economy which George afterward carried unflinchingly to its logical conclusions and moral outcome, thereby earning from another hostile critic the just appellation of "Henry George the Orthodox," had been half a century dead. The ancestry of this Philadelphia boy, destined to lead where Smith and Mill had pointed the way, was English and Scotch, but his parents were American born. His paternal grandfather, a Yorkshireman, had been a well-known shipmaster of Philadelphia in its palmy days as a commercial metropolis; and his maternal grandfather, "a Glasgow body," had achieved repute as a Philadelphia engraver in President Washington's time. Passing from the public school into the high school of his native city and remaining five months in the latter, George worked two years as an office boy, after which, at the age of sixteen, he shipped as a sailor before the mast on board an old East Indiaman. Having made a voyage as far as Australia and back, he learned the printers' trade in Philadelphia and then went to sea again.

It is worthy of notice, as indicative of the kind of character he had already begun to make for himself, that at this time the Abolition agitation, which had become serious, elicited from him expressions on the subject of slavery (not in harmony with his father's political views, but against them) that revealed his impatience, even as a boy, of arguments for public policies which contravene obvious moral principle. It was a favorite doctrine of his through life that the right thing is always in the long run the best thing.

When George left the printers' case to return to the sea, which was in 1856, he made one voyage before the mast to

Boston; another on a government lighthouse steamer, as store-keeper, to San Francisco; and a third from San Francisco to Victoria and Nanaimo, British Columbia. On the latter he worked his way for the purpose of joining one of those parties of gold-seeking adventurers of 1858 whose well-remembered cry was, "Ho, for Fraser River!" The gold-hunting expedition failed and George returned to San Francisco, where he soon afterward married, where all his children were born, and where his career as a prophet began.

For many years he endured galling poverty. Its severity may be judged by an incident he related to a friend long after its occurrence, to show how sound-minded moral men may be driven by penury to the commission of crimes supposed to be characteristic only of hardened offenders. His second child had just come into the world. The prostrate mother was literally starving. So was the new-born babe. Every resource seemed to have been exhausted, and George was pushed by his affections to the verge of despair. In this frame of mind he walked out upon the street, having determined to get money from the first man whose appearance might indicate that he had it to give. He stopped a stranger and asked for five dollars. The stranger inquired what he wanted it for. "I told him," said George, "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."\*

George's poverty could not be charged to indolence or thriftlessness. He was a hard worker, was given to no vices unless smoking is a vice, and was extremely sensitive to all his responsibilities. He only happened to be one of the un-

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\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "The Life of Henry George," by Henry George, Jr., page 149.

possible than poverty itself. Mysterious and baffling, too, was his startling discovery that although the extraordinary prosperity of New York was due to augmented working power, yet upon the whole it was the working people who remained poor. This would not have been a problem under the old regime in France, where no producer could claim title to his earnings in opposition to the whim of monarch or feudal lord. But in free America, where the producer owns his product in virtue of his title as producer, and is at liberty to exchange it with other producers for their products—in these circumstances, how could the producing class remain the poor class as productive power increased and material progress went on? That was George's problem. It was not the bare problem of poverty, as some have supposed, but the problem of the persistent poverty of the great mass of the producing classes in the midst of abundant products and in spite of advancing productive power.

Nor was this problem altogether a material one. "For poverty," as George subsequently wrote, "is not merely deprivation; it means shame, degradation; the searing of the most sensitive parts of our moral and mental nature as with hot irons; the denial of the strongest impulses and the sweetest affections; the wrenching of the most vital nerves. You love your wife, you love your children; but would it not be easier to see them die than to see them reduced to the pinch of want in which large classes in every highly civilized community live? \* \* \* From this hell of poverty, it is but natural that men should make every effort to escape. With the impulse to self-preservation and self-gratification combine nobler feelings, and love as well as fear urges in the struggle. Many a man does a mean thing, a dishonest thing, a greedy and grasping and unjust thing, in the effort to place above want, or the fear of want, mother or wife or children. And out of this condition

of things arises a public opinion which enlists, as an impelling power in the struggle to grasp and to keep, one of the strongest—perhaps with many men the very strongest—springs of human action. \* \* \* Men instinctively admire virtue and truth, but the sting of want and the fear of want make them even more strongly admire the rich and sympathize with the fortunate. It is well to be honest and just, and men will commend it; but he who by fraud and injustice gets him a million dollars will have more respect, and admiration, and influence, more eye service and lip service, if not heart service, than he who refuses it. \* \* \* He may be a patron of arts, a Maecenas to men of letters; may profit by the converse of the intelligent, and be polished by the attrition of the refined. His alms may feed the poor, and help the struggling, and bring sunshine into desolate places; and noble public institutions commemorate, after he is gone, his name and his fame. It is not in the guise of a hideous monster, with horns and tail, that Satan tempts the children of men, but as an angel of light. \* \* \* Against temptations that thus appeal to the strongest impulses of our nature, the sanctions of law and the precepts of religion can effect but little; and the wonder is, not that men are so self-seeking, but that they are not much more so."\*

These were George's later reflections. But what first stirred him and awakened the prophet in the man, was the awful poverty he witnessed in the American metropolis. "When I first realized the squalid misery of a great city," he writes, "it appalled and tormented me, and would not let me rest, for thinking of what caused it and how could it be cured."† Thenceforth he devoted his leisure to economic

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "Progress and Poverty," page 455.

† Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "Progress and Poverty," page 555.

study—severe, comprehensive, systematic, critical and fundamental—that he might solve this problem; and when he had solved it, and given his solution its logical demonstration in an attractive literary setting, he dedicated the remainder of his life, come good times or evil times to himself, to impressing the verity of his conclusions upon the public mind. For what does it matter when death shall come, he has asked, “whether we have fared daintily or not, whether we have worn soft raiment or not, whether we leave a great fortune or nothing at all, whether we shall have reaped honors or been despised, have been accounted learned or ignorant—as compared with how we may have used that talent which has been entrusted to us for the Master’s service? What shall it matter, when eyeballs glaze and ears grow dull, if out of the darkness may stretch a hand, and into the silence may come a voice: ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant.’”<sup>\*</sup> With such a consecration of his life, Henry George became, if you please, “the Prophet of San Francisco.”

Early in his economic studies he had seen that the association of poverty with progress, a phenomenon he afterwards characterized as “the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization, and which not to answer is to be destroyed,”<sup>†</sup> is somehow engendered by progress itself. For he had reflected with infinite pains upon the significant fact, which he had first noticed in New York but now knew to be universal, that “where the conditions to which material progress everywhere tends are most fully realized—that is to say, where population is densest, wealth greatest, and the machinery of production and exchange most highly developed—we find the

<sup>\*</sup> Library edition of the Works of Henry George. “Social Problems,” page 89.

<sup>†</sup> Library edition of the Works of Henry George. “Progress and Poverty,” page 10.

deepest poverty, the sharpest struggle for existence, and the most of enforced idleness.”<sup>‡</sup>

Though George had early noticed this unnatural association of poverty with progress, the reason for it long eluded him. It came at length like an inspiration. Yet it was suggested by one of the most commonplace facts of business life, and one with which he had long been conversant. What he discerned was not a fact that had been obscure, but an overlooked relationship of facts that were obtrusive and familiar.

This was in 1870, just as the first continental railroad system approached completion. Demand for land had in consequence been running high across the bay in Oakland, where George then edited a daily paper; but that meant to him only what it meant to his less thoughtful neighbors. It was simply an indication of business prosperity, a manifestation of the material progress that Oakland and San Francisco were making. He had not yet related it to the problem that occupied his mind. But one day while riding on horseback out into the foothills, he suddenly grasped the deeper meaning of this business phenomenon, and the fateful riddle of the Sphinx was solved.

“Absorbed in my own thoughts,” he wrote to a friend a quarter of a century afterward, “I had driven the horse into the hills until he panted. Stopping for breath, I asked a passing teamster, for want of something better to say, what land was worth there. He pointed to some cows grazing off so far that they looked like mice and said: ‘I don’t know exactly, but there is a man over there who will sell some land for a thousand dollars an acre.’ Like a flash it came upon me that there was the reason of advancing poverty with advancing

<sup>‡</sup> Library edition of the Works of Henry George. “Progress and Poverty,” page 6.

wealth. With the growth of population, land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay more for the privilege."\*

Holding now "the clew end of the skein," George began successfully to unravel it; and before the summer of 1871 he had published the result in a 48-page pamphlet entitled "Our Land and Land Policy." This pamphlet was widely distributed on the Pacific Coast as a political document of extraordinary local importance. The original is long since out of print; but it has been reproduced in the Memorial Edition of George's works.\* Six years elapsed before he found the leisure necessary to elaborate this brief outline and give to the world the book that made him famous. He might never have done that work at all, but for what seemed at the time a crushing business blow, cutting off his expanding career as a newspaper editor and proprietor and reducing him again to poverty.

Four years previously, he and his friend William M. Hinton, an English boy who had spent the playtime of his youth round about the Chicago River, and who had come to be as he long remained a business man of high standing in San Francisco, had begun the publication of an evening newspaper—The San Francisco Post. It was the first penny paper west of the Rocky Mountains, and its proprietors were under the necessity of importing from the East a thousand dollars' worth of one-cent pieces to supply newsboys with change, the cent being at that time an unknown coin on the Pacific slope. The success of the newspaper was so great that all the mechanical facilities to which its proprietors could gain access, were strained; but with their limited capital they were unable to

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "The Life of Henry George," by Henry George, Jr., page 210.

\* The Memorial edition is now out of print, but the pamphlet in question is included in the Library edition.

enlarge their plant. In this not altogether unhappy emergency a Senator of the United States generously offered a lamp of Aladdin. He was one of the pioneers in the process of transforming the Federal Senate into a club of Monte Cristos, and a man of overflowing wealth for those times. If George and his partner remembered the old clerical story and suspected that possibly the devil had brought this welcome gift, they were reassured by the reflection that even if the devil had brought it the Lord must have sent it. So the millionaire Senator was allowed to buy a 30 per cent. interest in the paper and to lend the concern a considerable sum besides. But in a very little while after the plant of the paper had been enlarged, a financial hurricane struck San Francisco. Money was so tight that the Bank of California suspended payment, and even ingots of pure gold were literally refused as collateral for loans of more than 18 or 20 per cent. of their value. At this juncture the millionaire Senator demanded instant repayment of his debt, or immediate possession of the paper. The reason for his imperative demand was not a business one. Tight as money was with others, it was not tight with him. What the true reason may have been is indicated by the fact that George was invited to continue in the editorship of the paper, even in its proprietorship, on condition that he reverse its policy toward the Pacific railroad ring and thereafter support that piratical monopoly. But George had burdened his editorial vocation with more conscience than the financial backers of newspapers usually tolerate, or the ethics of ordinary journalism demand. So he declined the tempter's offer. It was easy to understand that this gift, at any rate, was neither brought nor sent by the Lord. There was therefore no alternative, and almost four years to a day after starting his successful paper George went out of the establishment and back to his dependent family, once more a penniless man.

Relief came from the Governor of the State, whose election as an adversary to the railroad ring George had promoted. In reply to George's request for "a place where there was little to do and something to get," so that he might devote himself to some important writing, Governor Irwin appointed him "State Inspector of Gas Meters," the only public office he ever held. It yielded him an irregular and meager though sufficient income, and required but little personal attention, most of the active work being done by local deputies. But George did not eat the bread of idleness in this office. As the responsible chief, he made a high record for efficiency and fairness which was universally recognized. Yet there was comparative leisure, and taking advantage of that, he applied himself industriously from August, 1877, until March, 1879, to the writing of "Progress and Poverty."

Only the barest outline of this interesting and convincing book can be given here. It considers its subject upon three entirely distinct levels of thought—economic, political, and religious. Had George not been so poor he would have written three books instead of the one. Under the circumstances he compressed the discussion of his subject in its religious aspects into the compass of a single final chapter, and reduced that with reference to political considerations to one division of the volume—the tenth book, so called—while he wrote fully only with reference to political economy. In this department of his inquiry he takes nothing for granted and advances nothing without reason, but subjecting political economy to a new and searching inquiry adopts those of its doctrines that bear examination while rejecting those that do not.

Among the rejected doctrines is the theory that wages are advanced to labor by capital. George makes it perfectly clear that on the contrary they are produced by the labor for which they are paid; or, to quote his own language, "production is

always the mother of wages." The payment of wages invariably implies the previous rendering of labor, which in turn implies the production of wealth. Paying wages, therefore, is but the return to the laborer in one form, of wealth he has already produced in another. It follows that the poverty of laborers cannot be accounted for upon any such hypothesis as that wages are advanced to laborers by capitalists.

Another rejected doctrine is the theory of Malthus, that with men as with animals, population naturally presses upon subsistence. But George observes, what statistical investigators long ignored but now admit, that man overcomes this pressure by adding to his knowledge and skill. When, for instance, animals eat chickens there are fewer chickens and the food supply for chicken-eating animals is diminished; but when men eat chickens, they propagate chickens and the food supply of chicken-eating men is augmented. It follows from the demolition of the Malthusian notion, which George certainly accomplished, that the poverty of laborers cannot be accounted for upon the assumption that Nature is niggardly. Nor can it be accounted for by anything else within the sphere of the laws of production. Nature being prolific and human intelligence progressive, there is no reason why labor as a whole should not be at all times able to produce all that laborers need.

Thus the inquiry is shifted from the laws of production to those of distribution—from the laws of making things, to the laws of sharing things. George is here in substantial accord with the classical school of economists as to the nature of Ricardo's law of rent; but he diverges when he treats the law of rent and the law of wages as correlative. While that school argue that rent depends upon differences in the desirableness of land, and that wages depend not upon land at all but upon the supply of capital devoted to paying wages, George explains that wages as well as rent depend upon dif-

ferences in the desirableness of land. Under his analysis they are the two proportions or shares of one whole, namely, of the whole produce of labor applied to land—labor including, of course, all human effort, and land being its natural environment. Consequently, he concludes that as either of these proportions or shares increases, the other must proportionately diminish; and therefore that as rent rises with the lowering of the margin of production, wages correspondingly fall with the lowering of that margin. If there is any flaw in George's reasoning here, it has never yet been pointed out; though it is upon this conclusion that his solution of the poverty-with-progress problem finally rests. For, in the development of his inquiry he argues that when in spite of increased productive power labor interests suffer, it must be because landed interests flourish. In other words, if wages, the fund that belongs to labor, tend downward or remain stationary with increase in production, it must be because rent, the fund that goes to the monopoly of superior lands, absorbs the increase. And this inference is borne out by "the general fact, observable everywhere, that as the value of land increases, so does the contrast between wealth and want appear"—by the fact that "where the value of land is highest, civilization exhibits the greatest luxury side by side with the most piteous destitution."

Irrefutable, however, as this fundamental principle of distribution is, it does not solve the problem, but is only a step, though a long one, in that direction. To say that wages remain low because rent advances, "is like saying that a steamboat moves because the wheels turn around." The further question is, What causes rent to advance? What is the force or necessity which, as productive power increases, distributes a greater and greater proportion of the produce as rent? George answers that one of these forces is increase of population; and the other, improvement in the productive arts. Each operates to

enhance the demand for land, and as the supply is limited, each therefore tends to increase its value.

Concrete illustrations of the principle may be observed on every hand. For instance, a building lot in Philadelphia at 15th and Chestnut Streets, which was worth \$8 in 1685, had advanced with a slowly increasing population and slightly advancing productive power to \$25,000 in the century and a half down to 1838. But soon after that, steam began to revolutionize industry, and in the following sixty years, under the spur of a rapidly increasing population and miraculously advancing productive power, the value of this lot leaped to \$1,000,000. Take another instance. In Toronto, a corner lot at King and Yonge Streets, was worth \$80 a front foot in 1833. In twenty-one years it had risen to \$320; in twenty-one more years to \$2,000; and in the next twenty-one years to \$4,000. Or, if you prefer, come closer home. One of the leading real estate experts of Chicago in the early '90's (Mr. F.R. Chandler) published the economic history of the Chicago building lot at the southwest corner of Madison and State Streets—about a quarter of an acre. In 1830 it was worth \$20. It rose to \$28,000 during the first thirty years, and during the next thirty to \$1,500,000.\* These instances are only samples. If all the data were available—the data of building land in city and village and town, of ranch land and farm land, of forests and water power, of mineral deposits and oil fields, of the land value that is represented by stocks upon the street as well as that which figures on real estate exchanges—if all these data were available we should plainly see that the land values of the country have increased, under the impulse of growing population and expanding improvement, to fabulous sums.

\* Page 286 of the Eighth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of Illinois (1894), prepared under the supervision of George A. Schilling as Secretary of the Board of Commissioners of Labor.

Yet it is the same land that it was before. If other property is more valuable also, that is because there is more of it. But there is not more land. The only change regarding land is that it is in greater demand.

Another phase of this phenomenon needs explanation, to make George's solution of his problem complete. To the extent that rent is augmented by actual increase of labor-produced wealth, it is augmented only as a proportion; and though wages are correspondingly diminished as a proportion, they may nevertheless be actually higher than before, because they are a proportion of a larger whole. But rent is not augmented by the actual increase of labor-produced wealth alone. It advances also in consequence of speculative investments in land. Land being held out of use for higher prices in the future, is "forestalled," as lawyers used to say, or "soonerized," as reservation settlers would call it under certain circumstances. What this familiar process may be called, however, is of little moment. The essential fact is that with speculation in land there is a decrease in the supply of land, without a corresponding increase in the supply of products. This tends, of course, to advance land values in general; and in so far as they are thereby advanced, rent is not merely a larger proportion of a larger quantity of products, but is a larger proportion of the same quantity. Consequently, any increase of rent due to the forestalling of land, decreases wages not only proportionately but absolutely. In dividing the total product a smaller quantity, as well as a smaller proportion, is left by rent for wages. This was the truth that flashed upon George, on his horseback ride among the hills beyond Oakland.

In that speculative tendency will be found all the truth there is in the Malthusian theory. Though population does not tend to outrun the subsistence which the wisdom and skill of man can obtain from the earth, it does tend to outrun the

subsistence to be got from the few and lean parts of the earth that are not forestalled. True words are those of George where he says: "It is a well-provisioned ship, this on which we sail through space. If the bread and beef above decks seem to grow scarce, we but open a hatch and there is a new supply, of which before we never dreamed. And very great command over the services of others comes to those who as the hatches are opened are permitted to say, 'This is mine!'"\*

If that illustration is too poetic for the hard-headed business man who has no theories but knows how to make money, let him pay attention to another, one that is perhaps better adapted to his understanding. I quote again from George: "Say to him"—that is, to the hard-headed business man—"Here is a little village; in ten years it will be a great city; in ten years the railroad will have taken the place of the stage coach, the electric light of the candle; it will abound with all the machinery and improvements that so enormously multiply the effective power of labor. Will, in ten years, interest be any higher?' He will tell you, 'No!' 'Will the wages of common labor be any higher; will it be easier for a man who has nothing but his labor to make an independent living?' He will tell you, 'No; the wages of common labor will not be any higher; on the contrary, all the chances are that they will be lower; it will not be easier for the mere laborer to make an independent living; the chances are that it will be harder.' 'What, then, will be higher?' 'Rent; the value of land. Go, get yourself a piece of ground, and hold possession.' And if, under such circumstances, you take his advice, you need do nothing more. You may sit down and smoke your pipe; you may lie around like the lazzaroni of Naples or the leperos of Mexico; you may

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "Progress and Poverty," page 241.

go up in a balloon, or down a hole in the ground; and without doing one stroke of work, without adding one iota to the wealth of the community, in ten years you will be rich! In the new city you may have a luxurious mansion; but among its public buildings will be an almshouse.”\*

Here, then, is George’s fundamental explanation of the persistence of poverty amid advancing wealth. It is the institution of private ownership of land—not possession for use, but ownership. Not that other causes than land ownership do not exist; not that other reforms may not be advantageously made. But this is the primary cause which neutralizes all secondary reforms. This is the robber that takes all that the other robbers are forced to give up. This is the robber that even robs the other robbers while they ply their predatory callings. Have we not heard, for instance, that the rents of the very poor are higher where facilities for stealing coal from railroad cars are good? This is the robber that compels so many people, as the Irishman said, “to work themselves to death in order to make a living.” The eradication of this evil, therefore, is the fundamental reform without which all other reforms will ever be unavailing.

At this point, however, George was confronted with two considerations: The all-controlling question of justice; and the practical question of method.

On the face of the matter there seemed to be no room for dispute over the question of justice. In the high court of morals, land monopoly has no standing. The only moral title to anything runs back to the producer, and land titles cannot be traced to that source. Of land it may be as truly affirmed that human titles are invalid, as it was of the runaway slave

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. “Progress and Poverty,” page 291.

before the Vermont judge in the old Abolition story. A bill of sale from the slave’s former master was offered in proof of title. “That paper does not prove title in this court,” said the indignant judge; “you must produce a bill of sale from God Almighty.” The principle involved was to George the same. “If chattel slavery be unjust,” he writes, “then is private property in land unjust. For let the circumstances be what they may—the ownership of land will always give the ownership of men, to a degree measured by the necessity (real or artificial) for the use of land. \* \* \* And when that necessity is absolute—when starvation is the alternative to the use of land, then does the ownership of men involved in the ownership of land become absolute. Place one hundred men on an island from which there is no escape, and whether you make one of these men the absolute owner of the other ninety-nine, or the absolute owner of the soil of the island, will make no difference either to him or to them.”\*

But an objection is interposed which sounds as if it might have standing in the moral forum. It is not to the sin of land monopoly, for it concedes that, but to the injustice of abolishing land monopoly. This angular objection rests upon the notion that an initial wrong may produce a vested right, not only legally but morally. Here is a fine fig, verily, to be gathered from such a thistle! Yet upon that hypothesis it is argued that the moral wrong of land monopoly cannot be justly abolished without compensating its expropriated beneficiaries. Like all other objections that have as yet been raised, this one was anticipated and answered by George himself. His answer may not be conclusive, but thus far it stands unrefuted. It involves the idea that no moral wrong can ever

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. “Progress and Poverty,” page 345.

ripen into a moral right. Some moral wrongs, indeed, are temporary in their effects; ancient wrongs like these, society should refuse to set right. Not so with continuing wrongs. From the obligation to right continuing wrongs, society is never absolved; not because they were wrong in their ancient beginnings, but because they are wrong in their present operation.

In taking this position, George appealed not only to obvious moral principle, but also to a familiar principle of jurisprudence. In no enlightened view of the subject, even from a legal standpoint, can continuing wrongs be held ever to ripen into vested rights. Wherever our jurisprudence acknowledges vested rights in continuing wrongs, it will be found to be because the vital fact that the wrongs in question are of the continuing kind is overlooked. It has been falsely assumed, for instance, that the wrong involved in land monopoly began and ended with the original wresting by force or fraud of the land from the people. But that is not true. As George contends, land monopoly is "a fresh robbery of every succeeding generation—a new robbery every year and every day." For, "when non-producers can claim as rent a portion of the wealth created by producers, the right of the producers to the fruits of their labor is to that extent denied."\*

The principle here involved is familiar enough. It involves power to prevent laborers from laboring. But we are prone to confine its application to the oppressive exploits of labor unions. When these organizations, aiming to secure for the families of their members from a day's work what might be enough to furnish a fine gentleman of leisure with his day's supply of cigars—when for this purpose they go on a strike and decree that no one shall work in their places if they can help it, we

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "Progress and Poverty," page 334.

hear much about invasions of the sacred right to work. But labor unions, let them be never so powerful and domineering, do not interfere as much in a decade with the sacred right to work as the institution of land monopoly does in a day. Yet your fine gentleman, while vigorously defending the sacred right to work as against the comparatively petty aggressions of labor unions, assumes a different attitude with reference to the enormous aggressions of land monopoly.

When discussing vested rights, let us not forget that the right to work and to keep the fruits of one's labor, is itself a vested right of the first order—a right vested in every one in virtue of his manhood; and that any institution, however hoary, which is derogatory of that right can never create vested rights in morals and ought never to create them in law. This was George's philosophy with reference to the institution of land monopoly. To apply the statute of limitations to land monopoly, he wrote—with especial reference to Irish landlordism in 1881, but with general reference to landlordism everywhere and at all times—"to acknowledge for it the title of prescription, is not to condone the past; it is to legalize robbery in the present, to justify it in the future. The indictment which really lies against the Irish landlords is not that their ancestors, or the ancestors of their grantors, robbed the ancestors of the Irish people. That makes no difference. 'Let the dead bury their dead.' The indictment that truly lies is that here, now, in the year 1881, *they* rob the Irish people. And shall we be told that there can be a vested right to continue such robbery?"\*

But the question of compensation is after all not important. It is only of academic interest when the fact is considered that

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "The Land Question," page 51.

the practical method which George proposed in "Progress and Poverty" would approximately and substantially accomplish the result at which he aimed without causing appreciable loss to anybody. While he held that we should satisfy the law of justice by abolishing all private titles at one stroke, this did not appeal to him as the best method. He preferred to the revolutionist's policy that of the statesman, whereby great changes are brought about under old forms. What he proposed, therefore, instead of abolishing land ownership in form, was to accomplish its abolition in effect, by gradually but as rapidly as possible exempting everything except land values from taxation.

By thus throwing the burden of taxation upon land values, the rent of land would be largely if not wholly drawn into the public treasury, without sudden change or any of the friction incident to a revolution in the form of land tenure. Among other advantages, we might observe in passing (though George himself made no point of it), there would be an entire avoidance of the question of compensating land owners for their loss of land rent. You don't compensate tax payers for taxation by restoring their taxes. Or, if you choose to compensate this kind of tax payer in that way, you would have to collect the compensation by taxes on land values, so that the land-owning class would compensate one another. George himself would probably have made no objection to that, though he would doubtless have smiled at the proposal as a reduction to absurdity of the untenable doctrine of awarding compensation for taking common values for common uses.

The taxing method advocated by George had larger purposes, however, than avoiding plausible but untenable objections. The single tax which he proposed would encourage enterprise by removing one of its greatest burdens—the burden of taxation upon industry and thrift; it would discourage land

monopoly, because the tax would be too high to permit of profitable monopoly of land except to put it to its best use; it would take approximately the current rent of land, which is of right a common fund, for the common use; and it would still further encourage enterprise by making land of all kinds vastly more available than now to men of small capital. The net result, approximately, would be the establishment of stability of tenure in land users, the appropriation to public uses of land values, the releasing of unused land from ownership, and the securing to individual workers of their full individual earnings—approximately neither more nor less.

Upon preferring this fiscal method of effecting his object, George found himself in the field of fiscal controversy. Here he was in accord upon principle with the greatest among orthodox fiscal students, and his own work was supplemented later on by the statistical labors of the late Thomas G. Shearman, whose "Natural Taxation" deserves the place of a classic in fiscal literature. The principles of taxation to which George adhered are not those of the continental students who build upon the historical concept of ruler and ruled. They are those which rest upon the moral concept of reciprocal rights and duties as between individual and individual, and the individual and the community. Briefly summarized, their ideal is that men should pay taxes not in proportion to their ability to pay them, a doctrine which would seem to belong more appropriately to the ethics of highwaymanship and piracy; but that they should pay taxes as they make payments for other things, in proportion to benefits received. This would be accomplished by the taxation of land values exclusively, for under that system men would pay taxes in proportion to the financial benefits they enjoy from society in excess of the financial benefits which society confers upon the poorest classes of their fellow citizens.

When George had finished his inquiry on the economic

plane, he tested his conclusions by an examination de novo on the plane of higher politics, in the course of which he unfolded his theory of the law of human progress. He then advanced his inquiry to the spiritual or religious plane. Here he touched upon the mysterious problem of the individual life; for in his previous examinations, as he says, something had come to him which he did not think to find, "and a faith that was dead revived." In each of these two independent inquiries, the political and the religious, his larger conclusions on the economic plane were verified, and so his critical and constructive work came to a satisfactory end.

Then followed the period of propagation. At first his manuscript was rejected by publishers, and he was obliged to resort to an author's edition, much of the type of which he set himself. This brought at last one publisher's offer in the United States, and that brought one from England. The book went slowly at first but soon gained headway, and within four years it had sold to the extent of hundreds of thousands of copies in both countries. It has been translated into nearly every civilized tongue, and all these editions still have a steady sale. "The Irish Land Question," now called "The Land Question,"\* which deals with the land agitation of the '80's in Ireland, though upon cosmopolitan principles, soon followed. After that, "Social Problems"† appeared. This is a series of essays which were published originally in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, and for which George got his first liberal compensation as a writer. "Protection or Free Trade"‡ came next. It had been delayed more than two years by the loss of the first manuscript when the rough draft was nearly completed.

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George.

† Library edition of the Works of Henry George.

‡ Library edition of the Works of Henry George.

"The Condition of Labor,"\* an open letter to Pope Leo XIII in answer to his Encyclical on Labor, was George's fifth book. His sixth was "A Perplexed Philosopher,"† a criticism of Herbert Spencer and a review of his philosophy in so far as it is concerned with the land question. Finally, though not until after the author's death, and then in an unfinished condition, the "Science of Political Economy"‡ was published by his son. Though incomplete and crude, this unfinished book embodies some of the best contributions yet made to economic science.

To propagate the doctrines of "Progress and Poverty" to better advantage, George had moved from San Francisco to New York in 1881. With the same object in view he afterward traveled through England, Scotland, Ireland, and Australia, speaking before large audiences in all those countries. While in Ireland he was twice arrested along with an Oxford tutor of Tory proclivities, on suspicion of Fenianism, with the result of making an Irish sympathizer of the Oxonian, and of forcing an apology to George and an offer of money from the British government through the American State Department. George accepted the apology, but refused the money. On a later trip to England he was welcomed on the platform by audiences of all classes, numbering scores of thousands, and his name was in every newspaper and on every tongue.

Before removing to New York, he had frequently taken an active part in California politics, though as a public-spirited citizen and not at any time as a professional politician. Originally a Republican, having been drawn into that party by the anti-slavery sympathies of his youth, he cast his first vote for Abraham Lincoln in the historic presidential contest of 1860, and continued to vote the Republican ticket until after Grant's

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George.

† Library edition of the Works of Henry George.

‡ Library edition of the Works of Henry George.

first election. But the centralizing spirit of the Republican organization under Grant's first administration seemed to him to have become so dangerous that along with many such staunch Republicans as Governor Haight, he left the party. Always afterward party ties rested lightly upon him. He had no inclination, however, toward permanent side parties, and usually supported Democratic candidates.

In 1869 he sought the Democratic nomination for the California legislature, hoping to push the fight, then gathering force on the Pacific slope, against the railroad and telegraph rings. For refusing to submit to an assessment imposed by the party machine, he lost the nomination; but two years later it came to him, and at that election he was defeated with the rest of his party ticket. In 1872 he went as a delegate from California to the Democratic convention that nominated Horace Greeley for president, and served on the committee to notify the presidential candidate.

It was not until 1877, however, that he was put to the test that comes sooner or later to all politicians of ability—the test that forces them to decide for themselves whether they are politicians in the exalted sense or only ambitious office seekers. Upon the approach of the election of that year for delegates to the constitutional convention of California, which occurred at the height of the so-called "sand lots" agitation among workingmen under the leadership of Dennis Kearney, George offered himself as a candidate upon a platform proposing to shift taxation from those who produce wealth to those who merely appropriate it. The Democratic party nominated him. So did the powerful workingmen's party. As every one knew, the nomination of the latter was a guarantee of election, and nothing remained but to go before its ratification meeting and accept. When George appeared at that meeting he learned that all the labor candidates were being pledged to the party

platform and to acknowledge the leadership of Dennis Kearney. Other candidates gracefully acquiesced as their turns came, but not so George. When the questions were put to him he rose before that great audience of excited workingmen and refused the pledge. There were some planks in the platform, he said, that he must oppose; and as to the leadership, he would not submit to Kearney's dictation. Unless he could have the nomination as a free man he would not accept it at all. Hisses greeted this characteristic speech, and the nomination was angrily revoked. George went to the polls, therefore, with only the Democratic nomination; and although he ran ahead of his ticket, he went down to defeat with the rest. The workingmen's ticket triumphed and for the time Kearney led the host.

No further political experiences marked George's career in San Francisco; but in 1886 he became the candidate of the labor organizations of New York for Mayor of that city. His nomination was made in response to a petition signed by 34,000 voters. Its dangerous significance became at once apparent to the Democratic politicians, who were divided in two camps. Tammany Hall and the County Democracy (until then enemies to the death) consequently came together, nominating Abram S. Hewitt to defeat Henry George. They were driven to this when they saw workingmen leaving them in shoals. Before uniting, however, they tried to buy George off. A politician holding high city office, with whom George was on friendly terms, waited upon him. The politician warned George that he could not be elected mayor of New York, no matter how many people might vote for him, and (on condition that he decline the labor nomination for mayor) definitely offered him, on behalf of Tammany Hall and the County Democracy, their joint nomination for Congress in a district where such a nomination would be equivalent to election. He added an

assurance that George need be at no expense whatever. "If I cannot possibly get the office of Mayor," asked George, "why do you want me to withdraw?" The candid politician replied: "You cannot be elected, but your running will raise hell!" "You have relieved me of embarrassment," was George's response; "I do not want the responsibility and the work of the office of Mayor of New York, but I do want to raise hell! I am decided and will run."\*

George seldom swore. He never swore lightly nor irreverently, but always with righteous indignation and in deadly earnest. On those occasions he could say "damn" with more religious fervor than many pious folks put into their prayers. He was not pious; but he was intensely religious. When, therefore, he told the New York politician that he wanted "to raise hell" with New York politics, he was as serious as was Washington when he swore at Monmouth.

And he did what he said he wanted to do. It was a whirlwind campaign, in which the "Prophet of San Francisco" preached his doctrines to listening thousands; and Tammany Hall and the County Democracy, both unspeakably corrupt, solemnly played in the role of "saviors of society." Men who have since become ardent disciples of George have acknowledged that under the influence of the upper class prejudice and passion to which the Democratic candidate appealed, they had actually feared that the streets of New York would run with blood if George were elected. The election resulted in a victory for Mr. Hewitt. He received 90,552 votes. Theodore Roosevelt, afterward President of the United States but then the Republican candidate for Mayor of New York, re-

\* Library edition of the Works of Henry George. "The Life of Henry George," by Henry George, Jr., page 463.

ceived 60,435. George received at least 68,110—for he was accorded that many in the count.

Although in the following year George was the labor candidate for Secretary of State in New York, he only carried the banner. There was no possible hope of election, nor even of a vote of any magnitude. Hardly had this apparent repulse occurred, however, when President Cleveland sent to Congress his tariff reform message. George at once came to his support, believing that here was the beginning of a free trade fight in old party politics that would develop along radical lines and lead on to that more perfect free trade for which he stood. He was doomed again to disappointment, for the tariff question gave way to the money question. In this contingency he supported Bryan, though not because he believed in bi-metalism, for he did not. On the money question he believed in a single standard for values and government paper for currency. He supported Bryan because he looked upon the silver question then, as he had looked upon the tariff reform question four years before, as a mere superficial manifestation, though a manifestation nevertheless, of a groping among the common people for democratic leadership against the strengthening forces of plutocracy.

Otherwise than in these respects George was not again involved in practical politics until the year of his death, which occurred in 1897 in the heat of the first campaign for Mayor of Greater New York. He had again become the candidate of the labor organizations to oppose Tammany Hall. Though well under sixty years of age, and until six or seven years before as vigorous in body as he always was in mind, he was at this time greatly enfeebled. A paralytic attack in 1890, producing a touch of aphasia from which he soon recovered, had left him nevertheless in a physical condition in which within five years he aged in appearance from a strong man in

middle life to a shrunken and wearied one of seventy. Yet he went into the political fight partly because the workingmen urged him to, and partly because he believed that his candidacy would directly save the city from dishonor and incidentally promote the cause that was always uppermost in his mind.

Toward the end of this campaign, which he had contested almost fiercely, he made one of his closing speeches for the day at an immense meeting of workingmen called to support his candidacy. The chairman introduced him, after the manner of chairmen wishing to flatter political audiences, as "the great friend of labor." This complimentary characterization caught George's ear. He was no demagogue. He played neither to the galleries nor to the boxes, and he would not be misrepresented though with the kindest intentions. Coming feebly forward, his voice gaining power, however, and expanding in volume until it filled the hall, he exclaimed: "I have never claimed to be a special friend of labor. Let us have done with this call for special privileges for labor. Labor does not want special privileges. I have never advocated nor asked for special rights or special sympathy for workingmen. What I stand for is the equal rights of all men."

This concise and emphatic declaration of the principles of a life time was his last important public utterance. Two or three more speeches, almost perfunctory, closed the night's campaigning, and when the next day broke the "Prophet of San Francisco" lay dead. The culminating hour of his consecration had come, when eye balls glazed and ears grew dull, and out of the darkness had stretched the hand and into the silence had come the voice—"Well done, thou good and faithful servant."