The Tragedy of the Wheat

HERBERT QUICK

Who of my readers remembers Frank Norris, who died in the midst of writing his trilogy on wheat, after finishing *The Octopus* and *The Pit*? I should like to read those novels again. Norris died in 1902 at the early age of thirty-two. If he had lived, he would, I feel sure, have escaped from the influence of Zola and given us even greater fiction than the books I have named, and they were powerful. But if he had lived my life, he could have written a story of wheat which would have outdone anything he had planned on the grain which keeps us alive. It might have been called *The Tragedy of Wheat.*

We grew wonderful wheat at first; the only problem was to get it to market and to live on the proceeds when it was sold. My father hauled his wheat from the Iowa River to Waterloo, and even to Iowa City, when it was the railhead for our part of the country; hauled it slowly over mere trails across the prairie. It took him three days to market a load of wheat in Waterloo. I remember his telling us one morning of a dream he had had. His dream was that after hauling a load to Waterloo, he was offered only thirty cents a bushel for it.

"I'll be goshblasted," he thought he replied, "if I'll take thirty cents! I'll haul it back home first and give it to the poor."

My mother gave him a long look and burst into a gale of laughter. Father looked dazed for a moment; and then the huge joke came to him also of the Quick family giving anything to the poor. It was a jolly breakfast. The poor! Good heavens and earth, where could any one be found poorer than we? We were impoverished by wheat growing.

But the worst, however, was yet to come. A harvest came when we found that something was wrong with the wheat. No longer did the stalks stand clean and green as of old until they went golden in the sun. The broad green blades were spotted red and black with rust. Still it grew tall and rank; but as it matured it showed signs of disease. The heads did

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not fill well. Some blight was at work on it. However, we thought next year all would be well again. And when it grew worse year by year, it became a blight not only on the life of the grain but on human life as well. Wheat was almost our sole cash crop. If it failed, what should we do? And it was failing!

We were incurring, of course, the penalty for a one-crop system. We ought to have known that it was inevitable. Yet even the agricultural experts did not know what was the trouble until a quarter of a century afterward; when it was worked out, I believe, by the scientists of the North Dakota College of Agriculture. Preying on the wheat were fungi, bacteria, and molds. We sowed wheat after wheat until every field became a culture bed for every antagonistic organism; but instead of finding a remedy, we were only amazed and driven to despair by the calamity.

Some of our people thought that one crop of wheat after another had robbed the soil of some necessary property; but my father pointed out the fact that not even on newly broken sod could good wheat now be grown. It must be something else. Maybe the climate had changed. If it had, why it would change back next year. So we went on, as farmers nearly always do, sticking to the system which had become established. The new breaking, we now know, had become infected with the wheat diseases from the surrounding fields or the infections were blown to it by the winds.

This era gave me my first contact with the phenomenon which puzzles so many city people. If the farmers are losing money on a certain crop, why in the world don't they change to something else? It is not so easy to change as the city man may think. . . . The manufacturer can shut down when the market is bad, or specialize for a few weeks or months on a thing which pays. The business man may slow up on purchases and narrow his operations, pursuing one policy one month and making a change the next, always trying things out in a small way and feeling his projects out. But the farmer's experiment always takes a year and involves so great a loss in case of bad judgment or misfortune that he perforce becomes very conservative. We were so in our devotion to wheat. It was tragic, but natural.

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The fields of grain had always been a delight to me. Nothing can be more beautiful than a gently rolling landscape covered with growing wheat. The shadows of the clouds swept over it majestically. The waves of shadow as the grain bent to the breeze, straightened and then bent again, used to bring tears to my eyes—tears of sheer delight—it was so

marvelously lovely. But now all the poetry went out of it. There was no joy for the soul of the boy who was steeped in such poetry as he could stumble upon, in these grain-fields threatened by grasshoppers, eaten by chinchbugs, blackened with molds and rusts, their blades specked as with the shed blood of the husbandman, their gold dulled by disease, their straw crinkling down in dead brittleness instead of rising and falling and swaying with the beautiful resiliency of health and abundance.

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We looked about in vain for aid, and none came. Some, of course, looked to the government for aid. Other people had help, they said, why not the farmers? The government gave the manufacturers a tariff, didn't it, so they could have the whole market to themselves? Then why couldn't it do something for us? This was about the time that specie payments were resumed, and "resumption" was a word much bandied about.

The silver question had not yet reached us, to puzzle and divide. We were on a paper-money basis. We looked to Congress to make times better by the issuance of greenbacks. Tom Brown, one of our neighbors, stopped in the front yard one morning, and, of course, the hard times became the subject of conversation. He brought the news that Congress had just passed a law calling for the issuance of some thirty million dollars of new greenbacks. This ought to help us some, he thought. I doubt if he or any of us had any idea of the way in which such an issue affected trade and prices through inflation; the argument merely was that it would make money plentier. My mother looked out over the wheat-fields and refused to show enthusiasm.

"Thirty millions is a lot of money," she admitted—though it seems ridiculous now—"but by the time it gets spread out as far as Iowa, it won't make much difference. It's like pourin' a pail of water in the river."

I can't help thinking that her summing up of the case was a good one.

All this time, while we were playing the role of the tortured victims in the tragedy of the wheat, we were feeling our way toward some way out. We knew that our fields would grow great crops of maize—it was a good corn country. But if there was more than one person who grew and fed cattle for the market there, I did not know of it. The average small farmer grew into the combination of hogs and corn. Gradually we changed over from wheat farming to big corn-fields and populous hog lots. And then the price of both corn and pork went down, down, down, until corn sold for less than ten cents a bushel in our depreciated money and hogs for even less than three cents a pound. We had not found out about the balanced ration and the hog's need of pasture; and after a few generations

of a diet of corn, the swine lost vitality and the crop of young pigs failed, save where there was milk for them. The villain of misfortune still pursued us.

Our fuel was now soft coal, and the cold winters of Iowa called for much fuel. A time came when a load of corn drawn to market would just about pay for a load of coal to haul home; so to save the long-drawn dragging of the two loads over the fourteen miles to the railway and back, we began using the corn itself for fuel. To the older people who had been reared in an atmosphere of the cheap fuel of the forests and the scarcity of cereals for food, there was something sinful in this. My Grandmother Coleman had a language of her own which consisted of groans, and this she used whenever she saw the great ears of corn going into the stove.

"When I think," she would say, "of the folks in this world that are hungry, it seems a sin to burn up victuals like this."

"Well," my father would reply, "I don't see as it's my duty to put in my time and freeze myself to death haulin' corn to town to trade it for coal, an' maybe pay some boot for the sake of gettin' it."

Gradually we worked out a better *modus vivendi*—worked it out in a welter of debt and a depression which has characterized the rural mind to this day. Corn and hogs came to pay us as little as had wheat; yet for a while they were our only recourse, for the soil refused to grow wheat. For a long time there was plenty of open prairie on which cattle could be grazed freely. My first economic usefulness was that of a herd boy. I was a very bad rider and was in the habit of falling off when my horse turned quickly, owing to my feebleness of spine; and I was never able to leap upon my horse's back from the ground, or even climb up. So I developed the scheme of getting on his neck when he put his head down to graze and sliding to place when he lifted it. Yet I herded the cattle summer after summer. Then the expanding acres of wheat land cut us off from any extended range of free grass. We had no fencing until barbed wire came in. So our cows were picketed on the prairie, led to water and cared for much as the Danes handle their cows now.

In spite of these difficulties, however, it gradually dawned upon us that by the sale of butter we were getting a little money from time to time. And though eggs were sometimes as low as eight cents a dozen, they brought in some funds. The skim milk restored our hogs to health. Without conscious planning, we were entering the business of mixed farming. My mother's butter was famed in all the near-by villages. In view of all the pains she took with it, it should have been; for she met the hot weather of our Iowa summers by hanging both cream and butter down the well

where it was cool. Finally a creamery was started in Holland, a small town near us; and by this time we had a nice little herd of cows. A tank was made where water could be pumped through it and in this we set our cans of milk; and the cream hauler of the creamery came, skimmed off the cream, gave us tickets for it and hauled it away, thus giving us the cash when we went to town and saving the women the work of making the butter. It was the first contact of the factory system with the Iowa farm.

All this made life easier both as to labor and money. But it was not our only amelioration. We began to have a better food supply. Our apple trees never did anything, for the varieties which thrive in Iowa were not known when our orchard was set out. But our strawberries, raspberries, grapes, gooseberries, currents, and cherries yielded abundantly. I had a patch of raspberries which I pruned and tended on a system of my own which gave us all we could consume and furnished dividends for our friends. In place of the old regimen of dried fruits and just dry groceries, we were surfeited on jams, jellies, preserves and other delicious viands; and with our supply of milk and cream, found the pioneer epoch definitely past so far as the larder was concerned.

The prairie had been tamed. Iowa had been civilized. Our eighty-acre farm was furnishing us a real living for the first time. The era of extensive farming and the consolidation of farms into larger holdings had scarcely begun. The curse of high land values had not yet come upon us. Though our incomes were very low and we were still oppressed by debts, I am inclined to believe that the years which definitely marked the end of the tragedy of the wheat were the best years Iowa agriculture has seen.

The farmer is often accused by the city dweller of being a confirmed calamity howler. He is. He is such because almost every calamity which comes on the land hits him sooner or later. Whenever any other industry shifts from under an economic change it shifts it in part upon the farmer, and the farmer is unable to shift it in his turn; while most other shiftees can, by adding to prices or wages, get from under the load. The farmer is so placed that there is nothing beyond him but the wall. He is crushed against it. There is nothing under him but the earth. He is pressed into it. He is the end of the line in the economic game of crack the whip, and he is cracked off. He has been cracked off into city life by the million.

The utterances of some great men to the effect that this is not a bad thing leave out of account the pregnant truth that, after all, the basis of civilization is agriculture; that our farming class, not being composed of fools, will not stay on the soil with better city opportunities open to them; that once divorced from the soil a people never have returned to it; and

that what we are observing is in danger of becoming the progressive ruin of our cities and our civilization. I have been describing the history of one family and one generation of farmers so that my readers may understand, if they try, why farmers are likely to be calamity howlers. The howl comes from the contact place of the calamity.

SOME NEGLECT OF THE JEALOUS MISTRESS

One of our novelists of condemnation could revel in the crude materialism of Mason City at that time—or now; or of New York or Philadelphia, either. We had no institution of learning higher than our public school. There was in the city no club devoted to the study of literature, history, or science. We had no Y.M.C.A. to arrange lectures for us, nor any other organization with the same functions. Parker's Opera House took the attractions which came along, and many of these I saw; because my friend Klinefelter, through his newspaper, very often had press tickets for me. These shows in a town of three or four thousand people were not often of a very high order; but occasionally the Andrews Opera Company, a family organization with headquarters somewhere in southern Minnesota, gave us excellent presentations of light opera; and such actors as Thomas W. Keene presented Shakespearean plays once in a while. Such cultural activities as we had grew mainly out of church activities.

Our family has always had a flair for music; at least since my father in his young manhood was chorister in his little church at Danby or Candor, in Tompkins County, New York. I had no musical training, but somehow —I forget how—I found myself a member of the choir of the First Methodist Church, under the leadership of a man who was one of those intellectual Robinson Crusoes, a person wrapped up in art in an undeveloped and materialistic society, L. L. Huntly. He was a good organist and had an excellent tenor voice. He confided to me one day that he was a cousin of the American Hemans, Lydia Huntly Sigourney, most of whose poems are now forgotten along with those of the British versifier with whom she was so often compared.

Mrs. Sigourney's poems still commanded some rather unmerited attention in the 'eighties. It rather startled me to hear Professor Huntly refer to her as Lyd. Huntly agreed that if I would sing for him in the church, he would do what he could with my voice. This was not very much, and yet it enabled me to earn a little money afterward at a time when I needed it, and it brought me into close relations with some musicians, many singers, and a few churches. It gave me an intimate familiarity with the palms of

the hands of many ministers, as they stood with their hands behind their backs and preached. All these things are worthy of study.

Huntly had the artist's temperament and loved to talk with me about his music. When musicians of real aquirements came to us, Huntly used to revel in meetings with them. Blind Boone, the pianist, came occasionally; and he and Huntly used to amuse themselves with a sort of a musical puzzle system. Each would play a selection, picking out passages supposed to be unfamiliar to the other, and ask the name of the composer. Once Huntly played a slow, stately largo movement with dainty little embellishments.

"That's Beethoven," said Blind Boone; "but what's it from?"

Huntly accelerated the movement, and it became *Yankee Doodle*, greatly to Boone's astonishment.

I have heard Huntly play this *Yankee Doodle* adaptation as a voluntary in church. I have heard him sing a Kyrie eleison in a perfectly angelic way, to his own accompaniment, as the people walked out of church. I feel sure they would have been shocked at this music had they known what it was. Among the things which were thought by Mr. Cliggitt to have interfered with my slavish devotion to that jealous mistress, the law, were the choir meetings I attended and the musical events in which I soon came to take part. They did cut into my evenings a bit.

This was the era of Gilbert and Sullivan. Mrs. James E. Moore, one of our musicians, undertook the presentation of *The Pirates of Penzance* with local talent. The role of Mabel went to Mrs. Moore, since she was a good soprano—and why else get the thing up? She found a tenor in C. B. Higgins, who did the Frederick part very well; and she managed to pick up people for the other solo parts. It was taken for granted that our best baritone, W. E. Ensign, would be The Pirate King; but Will began, rehearsed a few times and backed out. Everyone thought it was because he was jealous of the prominence of Mabel and Frederick; but he took me aside and assured me that his real reason was that he couldn't mingle music with the comic. Give him an oratorio part, he said, and he was at home; but he was too stately for any pirate king.

"The fact is, Quick," he said, dropping his voice, "folks think I'm stuck on myself, and stuck up; but I'm not. I act just the same way when I'm mowing the lawn or washing the buggy. I simply can't take this part."

So Mrs. Moore asked me to be the pirate king; and willing to try anything once, I consented. The thing went off—not my part, but the opera—with great success. We sang it and repeated it. And a year or so afterward it was staged again, and I went back from Sioux City to take my old part

in it. We also sang *The Chimes of Normandy*. I have proof that my part was excellently well done, for Klinefelter so stated in his write-up of the event in the *Express-Republican*. He was still strong for his discovery, and any sort of a noise made by me would have gained recognition as great stuff in his paper.

We thought we did the *Pirates* mighty well; but I have sometimes been harassed by doubts. I remember a dress rehearsal just before we gave our first show. Back in the wings were two strangers who, I discovered, belonged to the theatrical profession. The sopranos and the policemen who did the bass parts were rehearsing their part of the full chorus which closes the first act. The pirates were for the moment off watch; and in my kingly robes I was leaning against one of the flies, listening to the remarks which our two professional visitors were making. They were impressed, I could see that; but there was something in the tempo which disturbed them. I now know that we sang it twice too slow. General Stanley's daughters were not "climbing over rocky mountains" half fast enough. And when the policemen "slapped their chests" and sang "Ta-ran-ta-ra," they failed to put their clubs to their mouths as trumpets. The two members of the profesh looked at each other and grinned.

"Do you think we ought to tell her about it," asked one.

"No, for the love of heaven!" replied the other. "It would ruin 'em. They couldn't make the change at this late day—and, you know, some of it ain't so rotten!"

Rather considerate of them when one comes to think of it. I was somewhat disillusioned by this comment on our work. One experiences that feeling once one gets back of the scenes. When the flies were all run back on the stage of Parker's Opera House, the audience saw painted on the back wall of the stage a marine view, rather well done. It was a scene of green islands, waving palms and rocky shores. I had often admired what I took to be a sailboat represented as skimming across the bay, its sail dipping to the freshening breeze. But when, in my royal capacity, I went back to that wall, I was astonished to find that my white-winged yacht was nothing but a spot of plaster which had been knocked off by the awkwardness of some stage mechanic. The last touch of romance proved to be a bit of disrepair. That represents the difference between the view of the poor illuded occupant of a seat in the audience and the sophisticated one behind the scenes.

I have been away back behind the scenes in our national life since then; and I have noted many things in the highly exalted which to the public appeared as the finishing touches to a beautiful picture, but were to the

one back on the stage merely marred spots in the scenery. The generous heartiness of a great man turned out to be not much more than a rather good-hearted stupidity and carelessness. The intense devotion to the welfare of the people and to even-handed justice of another was on close inspection just a hole through the plaster of devotion to special interests. The inflexible rectitude of a third was largely obstinacy and self-esteem. The devotion to a great moral movement of another was a pose as far from the truth as the mark of the plank on the wall from the picture of a yacht. The deep knowledge of the law and the Spartan patriotism of another—as seen from the front—was intellectual denseness, lethargy, and laziness. The public viewing the bad spots in the wall through the haze of distance and the mirage created by press, platform, and pulpit, beholds every defect turned by our conventions in such cases to a perfection, every vice to a virtue. And the man who calls the hole in the wall by its true name soon finds how much more comfortable he would be if he cried, "Beautiful! Perfect!" with the rest.

Our opera company was largely recruited from the church choirs, and many of our beauties were members of the churches. Hence not a few of the best people were greatly scandalized. I think my friend Klinefelter was responsible for a part of this high tide of reproach. Kline said—not in his paper, but where it circulated just as far—that in his judgment, the Episcopalian ladies were the best dancers but the Methodists had the prettiest legs. Great heavens! To mention a portion of the human underpinning in this manner, and to have had the ocular basis for the remark, was something not to be endured—not in the eighteen-eighties. It is different now, very different indeed.

So great the departure from the norm of churchly behavior was this deed of enrolling in an opera company, rehearsing, actually dancing, and making possible such shocking comparisons among them as this of their dancing and one thing and another; and finally of presenting on the stage a profane piece like *The Pirates of Penzance*, so wrought upon the mind of the pastor of the Methodist church in which I was a humble choir member, that he prepared and preached a terrible sermon in which he condemned yieldings to worldly tendencies in scathing terms. He did not refer directly to the Pirates—he just scorched things so close to piracy that it hurt. I remember his text—and it was the text that most deeply harrowed up tender feelings; for while no one could say that it referred to anything of recent date, it had a swinging lash to it which hit everything and which was all the more cutting because of its apparent generality. It was Revelations 19:2: "For true and righteous are his judgments;

for he hath judged the great whore which did corrupt the earth with her fornications, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand."

How could one discuss such a text as that? Clearly it was, as the diplomats say, outside the field of discussion. Professor Huntly, who had not had a role in the opera, because he said he was too old to make love, looked quizzically at the ladies of the choir who had given Kline the chance to make his ill-timed and his really improper jest. They blushed, more with indignation than anything else, and swept with stately dignity from the church in which they felt that they had received an insult which they could not resent. One offended young matron left before the services were over. It was not what the text actually meant; nobody stopped to analyze the text; it was those awful words in it. I never heard any deliverance which could not be strictly construed to mean anything definite, or to be addressed to any one in particular, which made so distinct an impression. Several of our nicest members felt as if they had been called dreadful names. And this, I believe, is exactly the result which the minister wished to attain. How long ago this was!

As for me, I had no chips in the game. The pastor was not talking to me. I had already made for myself a position as a sort of free-lance, who did as he mighty well pleased, and laughed at criticism. I was on the whole rather titivated by the part I had taken. I had felt myself rising in the community out of my former obscurity. It is not every day that a principal of a ward school late from the country can become a pirate king, and have friends of the press to shield him from the criticism which no doubt he deserved.

In the summer of 1887 I had my first glimpse of a great city—Chicago. The National Teachers' Association held its annual convention there, and the sleeping car on the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul train was pretty well filled with people taking advantage of the excursion rates to make a visit to the great metropolis of the West. I was one of the party, and in it were Klinefelter, Tom Miller, Art Sale, Judge Cummings, and many more, both teachers and members of the laity. The sleeping car was a new thing to me. I remember that the extravagance of paying the porter a tip of a whole quarter impressed me as uncalled for, though I yielded to custom. Tom Miller invented several remarks attributed to me, the point of which was my verdancy.

"Did you hear what Quick said when he came into the city?" he asked so that all could hear. "He said, 'There's a house bigger than John West's. Why, Chicago's built up on both sides of the track!' "

This was an exaggeration; but the city was a great sight for me. The

Iowa headquarters were in a hotel across the street north of the Palmer House. The street between was paved with Belgian-block pavement. All that first day I was dazed by the throngs; and Tom said they found me once standing in a doorway as if waiting for something. When they asked me what I was waiting for, he said I remarked that I had stopped to give the crowd a chance to get by! This also was a statement colored somewhat by the mentality of its author.

I went to bed late that first night and slept heavily after the wakefulness of the night before and the weariness of a day of excitement. As I slept I dreamed I was out in Iowa, and that a fearful storm had risen. I heard its roar in my ears, deafening me. Surely this was a tornado. I was terrified, I leaped out of bed. The sun was shining in the window; but the roar went on. It was the thunder of traffic on the pavement outside. I crawled back into bed, but I slept no more; and I did not tell Tom or Cummings about my dream. They would have based a tradition on it.

Two inventions have mitigated the tornado which beat upon the sensorium of city dwellers then—the soft-tired motor-car and asphalt and concrete pavements; but still my dream proves what a revolution has taken place in the environment of a nation of country people, accustomed for ages to the stillness of the country-side, who have become city dwellers. The sounds of the city are only one element in this new world in which humanity has learned to live; but the noises alone mark a change from peace to a tornado. No wonder the neurologists have a busy life.

I never found out where the meetings of the National Teachers' Association took place. I began my career as a visitor to such gatherings, as I have in the main continued it, by ignoring the ostensible objects of them. I took my dip into the night life of the city. I rode in street-cars drawn swiftly along by horses and carrying one to the end of the line for a nickel. I stood on the shore of Lake Michigan and for the first time gazed out across water so broad as to form the horizon. And all the time I was filled with such a crowd of new impressions that they grew dim even as I looked and listened.

There was a landing for steamers then at the foot of Madison Street, at a place which is now nearly half a mile inshore from the lake. One evening an excursion for the Iowa delegation was planned. I started for the landing, alone, I think, when I saw one fire engine after another dash off southward, their horses running madly, their gongs clanging. I forgot all about the excursion and followed the crowd to the fire. It was miles away, but its flares beckoned to us. It was in fact away down in the railway yards; but it was worth seeing. The great soap works of N. K.

Fairbank & Co. were burning. It would be a great spectacle for me even now. The next day a member of the Chicago Fire Department told me that so large a proportion of the department had not been called out to any conflagration since the Great Fire.

To see the rushing streams of water turned to steam as they entered the flames, to see the great oil tanks heated one after another until they sent off huge clouds of black smoke, and then to see them burst into soaring beacons of flame, rising away above the surrounding buildings, laughing at the puny efforts of the firemen to control them—it was a marvelous sight. I feasted my rural eyes on it until it had begun to burn low and its spread was under control, and then went back to the hotel. I had seen something that none of the rest of the party had witnessed—an immense crowd at a Chicago fire, and one of the most spectacular conflagrations of the time.

I SEE A GREAT LIGHT

There be those called teachers who say to us that the villages, towns, and when the full truth is told, the cities, are almost without witnesses as to the great things of the spirit and the intellect. As for the rural regions, they instruct us, they are lost, as a matter of course. Does not "pagan" mean "paganus" which being interpreted meaneth a countryman? Brethren, it's a sad tale, this description of this world. Now Mason City is one of these lost towns in which the aspiring soul expires merely, or runs away to Lower Manhattan and spends its time running around, a merely spiral soul with more of its kind. But here is what happened to me in Mason City, Iowa, which I take it is another name for Gopher Prairie.

It was before I was admitted to the bar, I know; but just how long before I have no way of telling. Reverdy Miller, a young man reared in the town and educated in the colleges of the state, was one day when I came upon him, reading a thick paper-bound book.

"I was looking for some one to give this to," said he, handing it to me. "Take it and read it."

I looked at it with contempt; for it was a book greatly reprobated in the crowd with which I had been training; a book never read by those who condemned it; a book already known in most civilized lands, and often answered. It had been published for some years. I ranked its author with the two awful examples of destroying heterodoxy of those days, Herr Johann Most, and O'Donovan Rossa. Who of my readers remember those two disturbers? Few, of course, but they loomed large as agents of coming cataclysm then. This book handed me by Reverdy Miller, and the man

who wrote it, were in my opinion as bad as Most, Rossa and their writings. Yet I took it and read it.

From childhood I had read everything I could find dealing with the structure of society. Analysis of institutions was familiar to me. I was not widely read on these subjects, and much of my reading had been rather inferior stuff, like the greenback propaganda of my teens, and the partisan outgivings of the days when I took as correct what the Republican orators and writers sent out. The best of my readings had been the compositions of the fervent minds of the abolition era—Wendell Phillips, Lowell, Whittier, Emerson and their contemporaries. These were strong morally and weak economically. These were not economists—we had no "sociologists" then—but reformers. All of them but Phillips had accepted the Republican Party as the Lord's Anointed, and in so far as they continued to think on social matters, had become conservatives and reactionaries. They thought the crusade for national righteousness ended when the slaves were freed. Phillips knew better; but even James Russell Lowell settled down in the belief that his eyes had seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, and there was nothing more to do. When Miller handed me that paper-bound book, my mind was in agreement with those of the poets and apostles of the pre-Civil-War period who were still living. I had no desire to read the works of a mischief-maker and disturber; but I took pride in having an open mind, and possessed a curiosity as to what the fellow had to say.

The preface, dated November, 1880, while its sweeping generalizations rather took away my breath, was so calm, so quiet, so free from that blatancy which marks the howl of the demagogue that I went on to the Introduction, entitled "The Problem" with half my hostility removed. This man appealed to thought rather than to passion. But in the introduction, I began to feel the swell of a suppressed fervor, and I sensed the confidence of the writer in the fact that he had attained to truth. He spoke calmly of the failure of political economy as then taught to explain, to say nothing of proposing a remedy for, the social evils which every one could see. This failure he urged came not from the inability of the human mind to solve the problem, but from false steps in various more or less accepted explanations. "And," he concluded, "as such mistakes are generally concealed by the respect paid to authority, I propose in this inquiry to take nothing for granted, but to bring even accepted theories to the test of first principles, and should they not stand the test, freshly to interrogate facts in the endeavor to discover their law. I propose to beg no question, to shrink from no conclusion, but to follow truth wherever it may lead. Upon us is the responsibility of seeking the law, for in the very heart of our civilization

to-day women faint and little children moan. But what that law may prove to be is not our affair. If the conclusions that we reach run counter to our prejudices, let us not flinch; if they challenge institutions that have long been deemed wise and natural, let us not turn back."

What could be fairer, nobler, or bolder than this; and fairness, boldness and nobility thrilled me. I plunged into the book and read until I had finished it. The writer was Henry George, and the book was *Progress and Poverty*.

I have often wondered whether many men have passed through such an experience as mine in the reading of this book. I found the very foundations of my philosophy in the process of dissolution. Like the foundations of the Cathedral of St. Paul's, they turned out to be nothing but sand and rubble, and the structure of conviction and theory so dear to me was tottering to its fall; but the book did not destroy alone. It poured into the rotten base the concrete of a new and perfectly correlated doctrine, which has stood firm and unshaken ever since. But these foundations of belief which were moving, dissolving and undergoing reconstruction, were those of my very life. The dome which was trembling was that of the convictions which I had publicly proclaimed before my little world. Consistency is a very precious jewel, especially to him who even in a modest way has been a speaker and a writer; and I saw that if these were veritable truths which I was drinking in, I should be forced to repudiate my doctrines which I had held, and which constituted the bond between me and many dear friends. I was facing a crucial test of character, or I was being misled.

I struggled hard against conversion. Surely, I said to myself, there must be some error in this man's logic, some sophistry which I could not detect. I saw the power of his presentation, and felt the charm of his style. I knew that my mind was at close grips with an intellect of the first order, moved by an apostolic fervor. I said to myself in effect, that if this were really truth, I should be a lost soul if I rejected it; for it was not only a call to the discipleship of truth, but the most completely redemptive truth ever set before the world. It was true that all history was strewn with the wrecks of civilizations. It was true that progress had always been associated with growing poverty. It was true that all civilizations which had possessed the power of protecting themselves against destruction from dangers from the outside, had eventually rotted from within. It was true that the increase of wealth had been accompanied by the increase of poverty in America.

And here was an analysis of the factors which were not only at work in our own society, but must inevitably have been at work all through

history, which not only had produced the disease in the past everywhere, but must generate it in us as surely as decade should follow decade. Here was at last a perfectly plain and irrefutable exposition of the way in which wealth is distributed as it is produced. As every one has agreed, it fell into the divisions of interest, wages and rent; but George, for the first time, defined these three so that each included no portion of either of the others. He gave perfect definitions of interest, wages and rent. Then he showed that as rent increased with the increase of population, and the progress of the arts and sciences, it is always subtracted, and must in the nature of things be subtracted, from the portions of wealth produced going into wages and interest.

He demonstrated that with land reduced to private possession, the economists before him had been correct in asserting that rent is measured by the superior productive capacity of any land in question, in site value in cities, and in farming value or the like in the country, over the least desirable land in use. In other words, rent depends upon the margin of cultivation, as Ricardo, Mill and others had said. But George showed that interest also depends on the margin of cultivation, as it must take its share of what is left after rent is satisfied; and that wages also depend upon it for the same reason. Thus the land question became the fundamental fact in economics as well as in sociology.

I was surprised to find here a reformer saying a good word for interest; but George proved not only the necessity, but the righteousness of interest. He showed that rent is at the expense of interest, and thus takes from capital a part of a larger share which it should have. But the crux of his demonstration lay in the proof that it is rent which crushes labor down to the returns from the poorest land in cultivation, and that this really means down to the smallest wage on which labor can live and reproduce. He was not content with the really mathematical demonstration of this. He proved it inductively, and deductively. He scanned history for evidence. He stated all the objections which have ever been made against his system in a stronger form than they have ever been stated by his opponents; and answered them beforehand. And he proposed a remedy for the social disease of increasing poverty with the development of a civilization which was simple and just.

He showed that rent arises in the nature of things. No one is to blame for it. As land in a new society is occupied the superior land must bear rent. But rent comes, not from the labor of the owner, so far as the mere land is concerned; but from the progress of society. Hence, morally, it belongs to society. There this "unearned increment" of land values, in

city and country, should be collected yearly by the government as belonging to the whole people. All public expenditures should be paid for with it. No one under such circumstances would hold land for any purpose except use, and he would pay only what the use was worth. All wealth produced by human activities would be untaxed. Nothing would be taxed save that which was created by the taxing power. Really the single tax would not be a tax at all, in the ordinary sense, since it would be merely a payment to the whole people for a benefit enjoyed. All titles would remain as now. There would be no disturbance of any occupation. Things would gradually readjust themselves. Wages and interest would rise to their proper level. The problem of poverty and want would be cured, and that without revolution. People freed from the trammels of a rigid land system could readjust themselves to any system of public order they might choose. Even the benefits claimed by socialism could be realized in so far as they might be realizable through voluntary cooperation, without the tryanny of state socialism. This is in a very sketchy form the vision which dawned on me as I read *Progress and Poverty.*

A perfectible society, and the obvious means of perfecting it. The ancient riddle of ruin solved at last. The abolition of involuntary poverty in view. Eternal racial life attainable for us of the end of the century, under terms of freedom, and with no need for revolution. I moved for days in a plane of exaltation such as I have never experienced before or since. I was uplifted to the skies. Again I suffered. It was the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep, and the opening of the windows of my spiritual heaven. I can not wish any young reader a better thing than some such experience. I have never for a moment since lost that something like a transformation which came to me then.

Of course no such book ought to have been given me by a young man born and brought up in Gopher Prairie; and no young man from a still more sordid plane of our lost and damned American life ought to have read it—not if we are to believe what recent pictures of such life depict. Yet Reverdy Miller gave and commended it to me, and I read it. And when I went back to him with a new light in my face, I suspect obscured by some clouds of doubt, and asked him if he believed what George had written, he said he did.

"Nobody can refute it," said he. "It's the real stuff!"

But I was not ready to take what he said as any strong buttress of a thing which must stand against every attack. He was a Democrat, for one thing, and I had a feeling that he had a weakness for the new and untried. So I went to Richard Montague, who had been our prize student in the

Mason City High School, and had come back from the state university trailing clouds of academic glory and a lawyer's sheepskin. He had a mind, the reaction of which it was worth while to get.

"Have you read *Progress and Poverty*?" I asked him.

"Yes," said he.

"What do you think of it?"

"It's the political economy of the future," he replied. "It is a discovery in the realm of thought. It's truth."

Then, even in Mason City, I had another mind to which I could appeal. I could ask Duncan Rule what he thought of it.

"I've been reading *Progress and Poverty*," said I. "Have you read it, Dunc?"

"Yes," said he, "I've given it a pretty close study."

"What do you think of it?" I asked.

"Well," said Duncan, who unlike Miller and Montague had an official position to maintain, "it makes the other political economists look like infants. If you grant George's premises, you can't avoid his conclusions."

I sat a while in thought, weighing what he had said. These were men who did their own thinking, to whom I had appealed. They had seen nothing wrong with the book. I realized that in Rule's mind the doubtful point was not in the system itself, but in getting it applied.

"Well," said I at last, "I think I'm as good a judge of his premises as any one. It was his logical processes I was inquiring about. Anything wrong with them?"

"Not a thing!" said Duncan.

I don't believe I could have found more intelligent men anywhere with whom to confer on this matter of "weighing a philosopher and gauging a philosophy," than these three natives and lifelong residents of this little burg on the Iowa prairie. I have always found such men wherever I have gone. The writers who condemn our society for its lack of people of brain and vision merely describe what they have wished to find. The masses of our people are rich in every desirable human trait. All they need is a state of things calculated to bring these virtues to the surface, rather than to stunt and dwarf them. In this fact lies the hope of all our future.

As for the philosophy with which I became acquainted, a search of forty years for truth has never shaken my faith in its correctness, nor in the belief that it must be accepted, not only in America but all over the world if civilization is not to rot down into ruin as have those of the past. I have tried to find the answer to it; but there is none. I do not mean that I agree with Henry George in everything, but in every vital point in his system,

I believe more strongly than ever. My experience as a man of affairs, and a student of world history as well as of sociology, has confirmed this faith. I have long since ceased to expect any progress of any consequence toward it in my time. At first I could not see how it could fail to win a great victory soon; but I made no allowance for the inevitable "drag" between the discovery of truth and its acceptance and adoption in human affairs.

And it may never be accepted. If not, our civilization will not last, and the world, it seems to me, will be worse off than in past ages when dominant cultures have broken down through the conflict between the House of Want and the House of Have; for we can now see no fresh barbarians to come in and take our places. It may be that the last Great Experiment is now going on. It may be that in Henry George we have in America produced the mind which will make it a success. If there is any such thing as overruling guidance of our affairs, this must be so.