

I Met Henry George

A gentle, homely philosopher, widely travelled within the U.S.A. who had followed many callings, Mr. James C. Carson celebrated his hundredth birthday last August and died just before Christmas. By means of the Bluebird Letters which he wrote, published fortnightly and circulated privately from his home in Muncie, Indiana, he sought to help others to discover and share with him the Henry George philosophy of freedom and equal rights. Among those whom he influenced was Mr. Elmer Greenlee, who is continuing to issue the Letters.

AWAY back in the early '80's while an active in the Knights of Labor as an official in the Coopers' Union, I was on a big strike in the furniture industry of Grand Rapids, Michigan. I had gone on to New York and was coming back on the New York Central and on my way to Chicago when I struck up a conversation with a little man with a reddish beard.

During our conversation I mentioned the strike, the miserable working conditions, the hundreds of men walking the streets, broke and hungry, the vicious methods employed by the companies. Beside the many underhanded ways resorted to by the companies, they had imported strikebreakers. The strikebreakers were sleeping on cots in the plants, guarded by armed Pinkerton detectives.

A real believer in unions, I did not hesitate to state in unvarnished language my views of the companies and their "scab" labouring men. Finally the man asked me—he never expressed an opinion, just questioned me—"Do you think those men left good paying jobs to take jobs of that kind?" Well, I could not answer him. I just stormed around for deep down in my heart, I knew that they had not.

The man was getting off at Cleveland, Ohio. While we were standing on the platform, he said, "I wrote a book on this once. If you will give me your name and address, I will send you a copy. I would like you to criticise it." He was plainly dressed, but when the porter brought out his bags, he absent-mindedly ran his hand in his pocket, shoved something in the porter's hand and continued his conversation with me. Naturally I supposed it was a quarter tip and thought nothing of it until afterwards when the porter showed me the silver in his hand. "Well!" he said, "you can't tell from de looks of de frog how fah he kin leap." Later, he said, "Say, mister, Ah couldn't help overhearing what you gennumen was sayin', and it 'peared to me he was handin' you something."

Months afterwards I got the book, *Progress and Poverty*, written by Henry George. It was the first I knew who it was with whom I had been talking. Then I read the book with prejudice, searching for the error with which to knock down his ears. When I came to the chapter "Disproof of the Malthusian Theory," I thought, "Old man, here is where you get your brains knocked out. Malthus is Darwin all over."

George proceeded to quote Malthus in full. At the close, he wrote, "All this I deny." He then proceeded to

destroy the Malthus theory in the most convincing manner. *Progress and Poverty* not only changed my view of Malthus, but it changed my view of the whole labour situation. I became a different labourite after that. But several years passed and a number of events took place before I began to realise how great a thinker Henry George really was.

My first jolt came in a little mining town in Michigan where, travelling by train, I had laid over for the night. A vicious strike, many weeks old, had just been lost by the miners. Labour unions were many years from achieving the immense power and the standing in the courts they now have, and the strike had been crushed in blood and violence. The Michigan State Militia had been sent in to "preserve order" with fixed bayonets.

The miners and their families were living in tin and tarpaper shacks back in the hills. Their meagre savings and their credit exhausted, they were starving. Pitiful stories were being circulated about families freezing for lack of fuel, and a meeting had been called by the townspeople to discuss what could be done to relieve the suffering. Having nothing to do that night, I attended their meeting.

The chairman was a minister. He had an awful time raising any money at all. The merchants who had been doing business on credit with the miners, were hit pretty hard. Finally someone bid in \$5. The highest bid, I think, was \$25. Then an old woman got up and bid in \$500. That bid broke up the meeting, and the minister proceeded to put her in heaven on the right side of Christ.

The next morning I encountered a fellow I knew, and I said, "Say, that old girl is quite an asset to your community. Who is she?"

"Say, wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "That 'old girl'—and what I am about to tell you, you can check right here—heired title to land, a lot of cut-over stuff, from her grandfather who bought it from the government at \$1 an acre. That title is for the land where they are mining the ore.

"She gets for every \$100 worth of ore taken out of that ground, \$84. Capital, the fellow who put in all the machinery, built the railroad into the ore, and furnished the ships that transport the ore to the mills, and labour, the fellow who operates it all, fought this vicious battle over the \$16 that are left.

"When they asked the 'old girl' to reduce her royalties, she replied, 'No! I will go to England to live until you get this nasty mess settled. Nature will take care of my

ores.' Neither capital nor labour asked for her charity. All they wanted was the opportunity to produce from natural resources the wealth that people needed."

It was then I realised what Henry George meant when he wrote that under our present system of taxation, the titleholder to this earth has the stranglehold on both capital and labour. By failing to collect in full the value that attaches to this earth by reason of the presence of each and every one of us, the government empowered that heiress to deny access to 'her' land until capital and labour agreed to hand her all but the crumbs of the wealth they had produced in order to live. All she gave in exchange for the \$84 was to say, "Yes, you can work there." Had she heired title to the State of Michigan, she would have had the same power on a greater and grander scale, the power to shut millions of us from this earth—this earth created by God and intended by Him to be the equal inheritance of all generations of men.

My second jolt came during the gas boom in central Indiana. A severe shortage of barrels developed in Indianapolis. I was sent out by Standard Oil to rush in the barrels. I found and bought three car loads in Anderson, Indiana. When I asked the porter at the hotel where I could get some fellows to load the barrels, he didn't know anybody. I had on good clothes and my hands were not in condition, and I did not relish the prospect of doing that work. I went out to find the men.

I accosted three coloured fellows in jumpers coming out of a saloon. "Where can I get someone to load barrels?"

"I don't know, boss," said one. "Everybody is pretty busy here. We is layin' those streets by 'lectric lights. But if it will 'commodate you any an' you will pay us a night's wages, we will lay off tonight and go load yo' barrels."

"Come with me," I said. The barrels were loaded in less than one hour and everybody was happy.

It was then I realised what Henry George meant about capital and labour being natural partners. As a capitalist, I wanted the work done and knew what I could afford to pay. As labour, the coloured fellows knew the work they wanted and the price. To get them, I had to offer them something better than they already had. A labour organisation was not needed. How could there be any quarrel between us? It was quite a contrast to the situation I had witnessed in Michigan.

My third jolt came while riding by train across the plains states. My companion called my attention to the fields just outside the window. A thaw followed by a freeze had coated the spring wheat with ice. Obviously, the prospects for a harvest were poor. He proposed that we take a flyer on the market, gambling on wheat futures. I hesitated, but I kept looking out the window, watching mile after mile of frozen fields glittering under the sun. Finally I accepted the proposition and we began watching the market for a rise.

The rise did start up as we had anticipated, but it no sooner started than wheat rolled in from abroad, from Canada and South America and even Australia, and the

price of wheat went down again. That jolted me into re-reading Henry George on the world-wide interdependence of production and exchange of wealth.

Had I been a big operator with political pull in Congress, I could have used what Henry George defined "the Black Art of political economy" to wall off non-domestic wheat by a tariff to "protect" our American farmer from "unfair competition by slave labour in foreign lands"—and thereby covered my "investment." On the other hand, as a small-time gambler, had I read the works of George and taken his philosophy seriously, I would never have gambled on the crop failure I could see without taking the rest of the world into consideration.

Those three jolts along with others gradually caused me to realise the advantages that result from taking the broad view of wealth production and its distribution and they gradually caused me to realise how great a thinker Henry George really was. The works of George have followed me all through life, and they have prevented me from making many serious mistakes. My early experiences as they related to the philosophy taught by Henry George also illustrate why it is a novice in political economy, confused by what is being taught in nearly all our schools and colleges and upheld by nearly all our organised religions, discovers such great difficulty in chopping through the brambles to the tap root of our troubles: the wrong source taxation that enables and encourages land speculators to flourish on that fund that arises as people increase on this earth, the community-made land values; the wrong source taxation that is forcing upon us quarrels and fights for markets at home and abroad; the wrong source taxation that is now threatening to plunge us into what may prove the last war of our race, a war fought with nuclear weapons and strange chemicals.

"PERSONALLY SPEAKING" SERIES

The first six articles in this series have been reprinted as single sheet quarto leaflets. Copies may be had free on application. Titles are :

1. **A Planter's Story**—F. Dupuis.
2. **An Engineer's Philosophy**—Austin H. Peake, M.A.
3. **Banishing Darkness**—R. J. Rennie, B.Sc.
4. **Justice and Social Reform**—F. A. W. Lucas, Q.C.
5. **Both Feet on the Ground**—V. H. Blundell.
6. **Reflections of a Californian Banker**—J. Rupert Mason.

★

Articles accepted for this series have been contributed by:

- W. E. Standring**—of Western Australia.
- J. Paluzic-Borrell**—of Barcelona.
- H. F. Levett**—of Transvaal, South Africa.
- E. J. Craigie**—of South Australia, President Emeritus of the International Union.
- Ole Wang**—of Norway.

They will be published as space permits, not necessarily in the above order.