THE PRINTER AND THE RIDDLE

THE STORY OF HENRY GEORGE

by JOSEPH COTTLER

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I

THE riddle first challenged him when he was a boy of eighteen. He had a job then in a printing house in Philadelphia, where he was born. As the youngest typesetter in the house he liked to goad the older men into debates. He used to stand at the case and raise all sorts of questions in politics, religion, travel — culled from his reading the night before.

They were talking of hard times one day, and an elderly printer remarked that wages were much higher in the United States than anywhere in Europe. "That's because the United States is young," he explained. "When a land gets old, like Europe, people find it hard to make a living there. Wages sink so low. Look at us in America: Wages are higher in California than in New York. That's because California is younger."

"But why?" asked Henry George. "Why should the age of a country affect the pay envelope? Don't

the people do the same amount of work whatever the age of their country?"

The elderly printer did not know.

"The older the country, the richer," persisted the young man. "I should think its wages would be higher."

"But they aren't."

And that was the riddle that lodged in Henry George's mind.

It came up again for an answer shortly after when he sat on the deck of a schooner in the Pacific Ocean, bound for the Fraser River in British Columbia. He had worked his passage out to California, in search of the higher wages of the new land. San Francisco was then a city of shanties stuck to sides of a sheaf of hills, its streets restless with fortune hunters. There was gold in the hills. But when Henry George arrived in 1858, the best "claims" had already been located, and the look in the eyes of the fortune hunters grew day by day hungrier. He himself had taken odd jobs at his trade of printing, meanwhile sharing the golden dreams of his neighbors. Suddenly the news broke out of the discovery of placer mines on the banks of the Fraser River. The land was still untenanted and waiting to be staked out. At once the docks of San Francisco were crowded with emigrants, Henry George among them.

On the deck of the schooner, which took each

man to his own nugget, the miners exchanged stories of lucky strikes, of how this or that prospector had dug and washed dirt for months without scraping together enough "dust" to buy a fried egg, and how one day — and, well, how he was back home now with the world in his pocket. Every cheek flushed. They spoke of California, how it had lured people from every corner of the world, even China.

"There's the trouble," said one of the miners. "The Chinese should be kept out."

"They don't do us any harm," objected Henry George. "They work the cheap diggings. We don't care to work them."

"They do no harm now," admitted the miner. "But wages will not always be as high as they are to-day in California. As the country grows, wages will come down, and some day we shall be glad to get those diggings that the Chinamen are now working."

Again the ominous riddle!

Later he encountered it on another turn in the road of Western progress. Plans were in the air to lay down a railroad overland between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, linking the Far West to the East. In the streets of San Francisco men spoke of the coming of the railroad as the priests in the mission spoke of the millennium. The railroad would bring prosperity to the West.

"Yet what good will it bring men like me, hired hands?" wondered Henry George.

He had had no luck in the gold hunt, had come back dead broke to his old job of setting type. He saw no hope in further prospecting. All the good diggings had been staked out, every river bed and bank worked over, and only the barren ones left. The new prospectors turned to the dry diggings in ravines, on hillsides. They bored wells, sank shafts into the earth, shot columns of water against the hillside, and were lucky if they washed out enough "pay dirt" for a day's wages. Rumor whispered of the good pay dirt yonder, here, there. But the sun had set for the adventurer prowling with his shovel, pick and pan.

The gold fever had gone from the blood of young Henry George and left him depressed. He had been led on by a mirage of wealth, and found himself instead working long and hard for bare sustenance.

"How I long for the Golden Age," he wrote to the folks back home, "when the poorest will have a chance to use all his God-given faculties, and not be forced to drudge away the best part of his time. . . . Sometimes I feel sick of the fierce struggle of our high civilized life."

He worked so much of the day that he had no time or energy left for reading in the evening. He wore his clothes until they were rags. He econ-

omized in every way, yet he hadn't enough to meet his board bill. Times were bitter. In Sacramento the first shovelful of earth was dug for the railroad which was to join the East to the West and, so people said, bring good times. Henry George was doubtful. Why was it that the wealthier a country became, the poorer its people? Sphinx-like, the riddle taunted him.

Times grew even worse for him. He had married, and with work scarce and a family to support, he was frantic. The day his second baby was born, he had no money to buy food. He went into the street and walked along slowly, eyeing every passer. At last he picked his man, stopped him and spoke in a firm tone.

"I need five dollars. Will you let me have it?"

The man looked at him. "What do you want it for?"

"My wife is ill. I have nothing to give her to eat."

The stranger hesitated, then reached into his pocket.

"What would I have done," wondered Henry George afterward, "had he refused? I was desperate." He saw that poverty breeds criminals as well as beggars. That was why the riddle must be answered. "Yes," he thought. "The railroad will bring us wealth. Those who have, will have more; but the average person will be poorer. San

Francisco will build its fine mansions; but along with them the slum will arise, the almshouse and the jail."

The riddle that stalked him threw him its last and fiercest challenge in the city of New York. Times had improved for him; he was now an editor of a San Francisco newspaper which had sent him East on business. New York fascinated him. He saw avenues lined with mansions, and people in coaches. But when he turned his head, he seemed to behold the skeleton beneath this fair complexion of things: homes worse than shacks in the hills, people gaunt and weary. He saw small dogs fed and housed, and little children in want. He saw men and women swathed luxuriously, and others without the daily crust of bread.

"And yet," he thought, "there is enough wealth here for the needs of all."

When he was a boy of sixteen he had gone to sea. He had sailed up the Ganges in India, thrilled to be in the land of soft airs and dreamy luxury. At least so it was described in books. But the real India before him was a bitter disappointment. He saw the princely luxury of a few, saw jewels blaze in the trappings of elephants. But most human life he saw groveling in the dirt.

Now New York impressed him the same way.

His yearning for the sea had been inspired by the tales he had read of missionaries who had gone

abroad to spread Light and Truth among the benighted people of the earth.

Now he longed to become a missionary among his own people, to teach them to stamp out the disease of poverty.

Pity roused him to confront the riddle once for all time. "This riddle has its root somewhere. Wealth and want spring from the same seed," he believed. This seed he must find. Then, taking humanity by the hand, he would lead them to it, that they might destroy it. Although he had quit school before his fourteenth birthday, he had never stopped studying. Now he assigned to himself the problem: Why do a few people have so much, and most people so little?

A man of thirty, small and erect, with a full sandy beard and alert blue eyes, had undertaken to answer the riddle of the ages.

II

One afternoon, not long after his return to San Francisco, he took his horse for a gallop in the country. The clear stretch of wild land refreshed him; the jolting of his mount threw off him the cares of the day. Far in the distance he seemed to see a row of ties and poles bobbing past: the railroad was finished. The ground beneath his

mustang's hoofs was wild, but no longer free. It belonged to someone now. Everyone was in a rush to buy land. The railroad, people said, would raise its value. Buy land and hold it, they advised.

The mustang was panting and his rider drew in the reins. As they halted, a teamster happened along, and he, too, stopped.

"What's land worth around here?" asked Henry George.

The teamster pointed to some cows grazing in the distance. "That man wants a thousand dollars an acre."

Something clicked in the mind of Henry George, like a door opening wide. He was dazed with the flood of light that streamed in over him, dazed with the sight of the thing he had been looking for: the answer to the riddle.

Home he charged. He had to be alone to work it out. He had hold of the bare idea. That man who wanted one thousand dollars an acre, for his land — what had he done to earn that money? Nothing: he was just shrewd enough to foresee that more and more people would settle around his land. Land is the one thing you cannot create. Those people would need his land; he could raise the price of it.

"That is why," thought Henry George trembling with excitement, "that is why the more our community grows, the more wealth we are forced to

hand over to landlords. The people remain poor but the few landlords grow richer."

He sat down at his table to publish the thought. There flashed into his mind the image of the four men who built the railroad. As though in gratitude, the Government had given away to these men more than twenty-five thousand acres of the people's ground for each mile of railroad they had built. Few people cared. The vast empty territory of the West seemed worthless. Yet that gift had made the four men multimillionaires. . . .

It was wrong to give away the people's land, he wrote. True, just then, we had more land than we could use. That was because America was young. Land was still cheap; on the frontier, even free. His free land on the frontier made the American independent. He worked for nobody unless he was well paid for his work. He was cheerful and confident, because he was independent. For the same reason he was hospitable to strangers, to the downtrodden foreigner. He could afford to be. God's earth was plentiful.

But land had its end, Henry George pointed out. At the rate it was being fenced in, another twenty years would see the end of America's free ground. Already there were men who owned more land than a horse could gallop over in a day. One day we, the people, would need that land, and would have to pay tribute for it to the lord of the domain:

rent to the landlord. We would have to give him a share of the crops we raised, or a share of our wages, just for the privilege of building our house on it. And as the country grew, the landlord's share of our labor would grow larger until we should become no better than his slaves. Such was already the case in Europe, and so it was developing in the East. Thus, when people said that wages were low in the old countries, they meant that the landlords there took away a high share of the wealth produced. That was the answer to the riddle.

"But what of it!" he could hear the objection come from outside his window. "This is the country of opportunity. One man is the owner of a factory, another of a shop, and a third man owns a piece of land. Business is business."

Henry George was ready with his reply: "Oh, no. There's a difference. The landlord did not earn his profit. He did no work. He merely waited until his land was needed by other people. The community that came to his land created its value. That value belongs by right to the community, to all the people."

How can they get it?

"It's all very well to find fault," went on the voice of objection. "But if there's nothing to be done about it, you're wasting time."

"We must do something," warned Henry George.

"Otherwise the very ground which nourishes and shelters us, as vital to us as air, will be monopolized by a few men. Those few will own and rule us. And then democracy will perish."

"What would you have done?"

"One step only can safeguard us and our children: We must claim what is ours, every cent of ground-rent."

"What would happen if we so taxed the landlord?"

"It would no longer pay him to hold on to his acres. Land would become cheap. Settlements of people would flourish everywhere. The worker could reap the full harvest of his work. No longer would children starve in the streets of New York, to provide the princes of the Avenue with splendor. All our people could then live in ease and freedom. Through that single tax on land, democracy would be saved."

This was the powerful thought with which Henry George would abolish poverty. It kept whirling in his mind, and developing, and upon it his spirit soared. He saw the planet Earth sailing through space, a well-provisioned ship. But it seemed whenever a quantity of food was drawn up out of the hatches a few officers stepped forward and laid hands on it. The rest of the crew got only the leavings.

If he could conjure up ghosts, he would sum-

mon old Ben Franklin, the man of perfect common sense, and say to him: "The world has changed miraculously since your day. Hear the throb of our engines. Those are the slaves of our lamp. They can turn out a case of shoes in less time than one of your cobblers takes to put on a sole. They can spin cotton into cloth almost without the lift of a human finger. They can harvest our crops and build our houses."

He predicted the comment of the old sage: —

"Oh, to be alive now! For with plenty for everyone, life must be beautiful; your hearts pure of envy and greed; your bodies radiant; your minds in search of perfection. Pray, what means that terrifying roar?"

"That is the cry of masses of men out of work."

"Did you not say that your engines — "

"Yes, but those engines belong to few."

"Let the men without work do as we did. Let them go into the wilderness."

"That, too, belongs to a few."

Poor Richard would understand. "Then I seem to see a land of beggars and criminals; a land poorer than in my day; a land of discontent and misery." And without a trace of regret, the shade would vanish.

For three years Henry George spent his happiest hours in his room on First Street, San Francisco, in

the company of his figures and his visions. His children, stealing past, saw him bent over his table in the center of the room overlooking the Bay, his cheeks glowing and his pen gliding over the paper. During the night, sometimes, when the tide beat strongly against the docks, they awoke and there in the hall lay a yellow beam thrown by their father's lamp. At dawn the beam had paled, but not gone out. A little more of their father's plan for a better world had been drawn.

They tiptoed into his room, perhaps, when he went walking, or down to the newspaper office where he sometimes worked. They looked with awe at the sermon paper neatly piled on the table; at the bold letters written in blue ink. The words were lofty and melodious, but hard. Even the title was hard: "Progress and Poverty." But now and then little stories seemed to break out over the page. There was one about a pioneer driving his wagon over a grassy plain.

The poor fellow is looking for a home. He notices that around him the soil is rich. He hears the rustle of game, and sees trout flashing in the stream. He may as well build his cabin right there, he thinks. The only trouble with the place is that there are no people near by. He and his family have to do everything for themselves — build their own house, kill their own food, make their own

clothes. They are very poor, they have only food and shelter.

But presently another wagon rolls over the plain, another pioneer. He, too, can settle anywhere, but, since it is better for him to have a neighbor, he builds his house next to the first pioneer's. Pretty soon others arrive. The plain rings with pleasant sounds, and the men help one another in labor. Life is richer for everyone. Instead of each man's building his own wagon, or making his own shoes, one of them sets up a shop and builds all the wagons of the settlement, or makes all the shoes. Instead of everybody's journeying to town to sell his corn and buy his utensils, one man only need go back and forth; he opens a store. Pooling together, they hire a teacher. As the seasons roll over the little village, there are husking bees, apple parings, quilting parties.

But what happens to our hero, the first pioneer? It seems that someone says to him: "You've built a barn and a house. You've put up fences and planted an orchard. Now I'll pay you all that it cost you and I'll pay you for your labor, too. You don't care about the land itself, do you? Beyond the village there's just as fertile land you can have for nothing."

Our hero laughs loudly. Why, his land is next to the general store; a doctor has moved across the road; the schoolhouse is right there. He

wouldn't take less than fifty dollars an acre for his land.

The village grows into a good-sized town. The spot our hero had once found so wild and lonely teems with a thousand people. All kinds of shops have come to it. A railroad puffs by. Our hero's land is worth one thousand dollars an acre. In time, when the town has grown into a city, an acre may be worth ten thousand dollars. Our hero, or his children, suddenly find themselves rich. And they have done nothing but sit on their acres. To the end of time other people, more and more of them, will have to work for his children's children. . . .

The only point the George children could make of this story was that somehow our hero wasn't a hero at all; he was really a sort of villain, because he made people pay him for nothing he had done.

Perhaps the children overheard their father discuss "Progress and Poverty" with his friends. . . .

"We must make land the property of all," argued Henry George.

"You mean to divide up all the land equally?" asked his critics. "You couldn't do that."

"That is not what I mean," replied George. "Let the world carry on exactly as it does to-day. I would merely have our Government take all ground-rent."

His critics had a serious objection. "Yes, perhaps the world would then be a better place to live in.

But would it be fair to take away all the ground-rent from people who paid money for it? Your first pioneers are no more. They have sold their land. Is it right to punish the people who bought it?"

"Was it right to take the slaves away from people who bought them?" retorted Henry George. "Suppose Captain Kidd, the pirate, had robbed your grandfather of a fortune. Now suppose that Kidd's grandson has the fortune which you would have had. The law says: 'Young Mr. Kidd never harmed you. You must let bygones be bygones.' Is that fair? Well, our early pioneers were land pirates, although innocent ones. They took for themselves the increasing value of the land, even though they had not earned it. Unearned increment of land belongs to all of us. Let us claim it."

The children wished they could hear more about the pirates — "unearned increment" were such hard words. But they liked to listen to their father when he spoke, with a faraway look as though fixed on some vision outside the room, about the new world his single tax on land would make. In that world nobody could be poor. In that world their father would not have had to pawn his watch to pay the grocer. Young boys would not have to go to work, like Junior; they could continue their schooling. Nobody would be out of work, and no workers would ever need to go on a strike because

their wages would be high enough. Everybody then could be honest, and really have what Thomas Jefferson said he was entitled to have: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. At present, as their father said, Americans had the right to vote but not to work. They had the ballot but no bread, and there was starvation and misery throughout the land of the free and equal. . . .

One night in the spring of 1879 the gleam of light lay outside Henry George's room, as usual. Within, shortly before dawn rose out of the bay, Henry George laid down his pen. He had just written: "Beauty still lies imprisoned, and iron wheels go over the good and true and beautiful that might spring from human lives."

It was almost the last sentence of the book, "Progress and Poverty," and the face of the author was wet with tears. He was about to send into the world the vision that lived in his brain. What would the world say?

III

At first the world said little, and Henry George at the age of forty-two found himself with his book under his arm in New York, poor and unknown, in search of a job. But suddenly the spotlight of fame turned upon him. Throughout the country working-

men, in the midst of bitter strikes for wages and jobs, became aware of an eloquent voice speaking for them in the pages of a book called "Progress and Poverty." They hailed the book as a prophecy and demanded ever more copies of it. They called for the author, and Henry George went on tour, lecturing before crowds of people in the United States and Canada. His fiery presence branding his message into their hearts.

Who could answer him? Could anyone deny the pinched faces in the streets of a big city? No one with a heart in his body could fail to be moved by the squalor and the distress in the tenements of New York or the slums of Chicago. No one who had seen the figures of men and women shuffling aimlessly outside a factory, like discards of flesh and blood, could resist joining Henry George in pleading for those who were racked with poverty and uncertainty.

There were thoughtful people who agreed with Henry George that democracy would die unless something were done to elevate the masses of men, but who doubted whether his plan of a single tax on land was the right plan. With those people Henry George was always willing to debate. But there were others who raised a hue and cry against him, who shook their fists at him and called him "Robber! Revolutionist! Anarchist!" — their fists flashing with diamonds. Many hesitant people,

judging Henry George by his enemies, enlisted in his cause.

Abroad his fame was more intense than at home. He got his first invitation to cross the sea from Ireland, where the suffering of the poor was more pitiable than anywhere else in Great Britain. After his visit his name became Irish household words. But honor of him spread through all the British Isles. Next to the Prime Minister, he was the most talked-of person; and groups of men were organized to act on his plan. The great scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace, said that in his opinion "Progress and Poverty" was the most important book of the century.

When he returned to America, he was greeted by huge throngs of workingmen to whom he lectured at Cooper Union, in New York. Shortly after, it happened that an election for the office of Mayor was facing the city. The labor unions, deciding to put up a candidate of their own, were unanimous on only one man, Henry George, and they appealed to him to accept their nomination. The author of "Progress and Poverty," just then in great demand as lecturer and writer, was reluctant to enter politics. But a petition of 30,000 people touched him and he consented to run.

He almost won, too, which fact frightened the wits out of some people — those whom it profited to believe Henry George a highwayman from the

West. Nearly 70,000 people voted for him. As they put their mark after his name on the ballot, what did those people signify? They seemed to say: "In a world as rich as ours, poverty is absurd. It is not nature's, it is man's fault. Men have divided up their wealth stupidly and selfishly. We must re-divide it more wisely and more justly. Democracy, which decrees freedom for every man, is the most beautiful of ideals. But no man is free when he is as poor as millions of us are, for he is bound by hunger, by all his pangs and those of his family. From those he must be freed."

This was the basis of Henry George's politics. "It is not the end of the campaign," he said after Election Day. "We have fought the first skirmish."

His next move was to start a weekly newspaper, the *Standard,* in which he broadcast his protest against progress with poverty, and the *Standard* gave rise to an Anti-Poverty Society. Meanwhile his world popularity was growing and in 1890 came his third call abroad, this time to the South Sea Islands continent, Australia and New Zealand. Once he had visited Australia, with a ship's crew when he was sixteen. Now, at the age of fifty-one, he came as one of Australia's most celebrated men. Whenever he went on the island continent he was the guest of honor of Single-Tax and Anti-Poverty Societies. To this day, although his principles of the land tax are practised in various parts of the

world, it flourishes best throughout Australia and New Zealand. When he returned to New York, however, his honor at home was rival to that abroad. He found in progress a national convention of "single-tax" men. He heard himself dubbed "Saint George."

In June 1897, the labor unions again asked him to run for the office of Mayor of New York. This time, it was felt, the banner of Saint George could be raised on the City Hall. There was one fear — on the score of Henry George's health. He was sick from overwork. His face was ashen, his body thin. The physician forbade his taking part in the campaign.

"Tell me," Henry George asked the doctor. "If I accept, what is the worst that can happen to me?"

"Since you ask," answered the doctor, "you have a right to be told. It will most probably prove fatal."

"You mean it may kill me?"

"Yes."

The patient shrugged. "I've got to die. How can I die better than by serving humanity?"

He thought of the line of men standing on cold nights outside a Broadway bakeshop where the stale, unsold loaves of bread were given away. He would run.

He had to be helped to the platform of Cooper

Union where, before the throng of workingmen, he accepted their nomination.

"You ask me to raise the standard again . . ." he said in a weak voice, "for that great cause; to stand as Jefferson stood. . . . I accept."

Thomas Jefferson had once said: "The earth belongs to the living and not to the dead. The earth is given as a common stock for men to labor and live on." Therefore, Henry George's party became "The Party of Thomas Jefferson."

His doctor was right; the strenuous campaign proved too much for him, and on the eve of the election he took his seat among the immortals by the side of Thomas Jefferson.

"He was a tribune of the people," agreed the newspapers the next day, "poor for their sake when he might have been rich. All his life long he spoke, and wrote, and thought, and prayed, and dreamed of one thing only — the cause of the plain people. He died as he lived, striking at the enemies of the people. . . . He was a thinker whose work belongs to the world's literature. His death has carried mourning into every civilized country on the globe."

But Henry George has written his own portrait in the pages of "Progress and Poverty." He speaks of his ideal man: —

"He turns his back upon the feast . . . he leaves it to others to accumulate wealth . . . to

bask themselves in the warm sunshine. . . . He works for those he never saw and never can see. . . . He toils in the advance where it is cold, and there is little cheer from men, and the stones are sharp and the brambles thick. Into higher, grander spheres . . ."

. . . Where Henry George comes at last, and stands fixed among the traditions of America.

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