

Too Late? By MARSHALL CRANE

"A Looker-On-The-Bright-Side,
That's the kind of guy I am,
And no one seems to wish me any harm;
Yet the man to whom the papers
Pay the consequential dough,
The guy with golden hours
On the evening radio,
Is the Viewer-With-Alarm!"

SINCE he composed this cheery carol the gifted author has put in a year in China for the OSS, and more recently he has been dynamited in South Korea. He himself is still looking on the bright side, but it is easy to understand his calling attention, even a decade ago, to the general spirit of pessimism which then, as now, clouded the vision of so many.

Among economists who subscribe to the Malthusian theory of population, or to its step-child, the Marxian interpretation of history, this sort of thinking is perhaps to be expected, but it is harder to explain in those who profess liberalism of any sort. And it is not confined just to learned circles by any means. Everyone has heard the same ideas expressed by men-in-the-street of all kinds. We hear wistful references to "the good old days" every day and everywhere.

"What's the use of kidding ourselves?" one man asked me. "We might as well face the facts. This thing has gone too far. If there ever was a point where we could have done anything about it, it's past now. Say what you please — it's too late, that's all. A man isn't a man any more; he's just a unit of population. And Washington's got its finger in the pie whether you're making money or investing it, whether you're spending money or saving it, and whenever there's a change, you can be sure it's to something worse. Don't talk to me about reform. I guess I'm a reactionary — when the country's going to hell."

Of course, this is a very gloomy view indeed, but really it is not a rare one. In every block you can find a dozen orators who at a moment's notice are prepared to lift their voices and their blood pressures to the same effect. And enough of what these gloomsters have to say will be based on fact to worry any socially minded person a great deal. They are concerned about many things, but their main theme always is the interference by government with the individual, with his activities, and with his property. Only a brave man will argue with them, perhaps only a foolish one. Much of what they have to say is perfectly true, but a thoughtful Georgist must disagree with one statement which he will hear all too often. It just is not true that "It's too late now," but the fact that a very considerable number of people seem to believe it is, is a very real cause for concern.

We find such people everywhere, in every social group and condition of life. Some are persuaded that natural laws or immediate necessity will cause the industrial proletariat in general to seize the tools of industry and set up the Communist state. This is a principle article of faith to all Marxists, though many must be worried by the fact that Communism has nowhere been so stoutly resisted as in the more industrial countries. That "it's too late" is to the Marxist rather a cause for happy anticipation than for despair.

This is not true of the many species and subspecies of Conservative and Liberal. As these support economic systems which are essentially

capitalistic, their conception of the nature of property is entirely different from that of the Communists and Socialists. Nevertheless, many foresee not only the coming of the Socialist state, but its subsequent disintegration, and the rise again of capitalism from its ashes, perhaps to pass away again in its turn, in response to some hypothetical and vaguely defined cyclical rhythm.

There are many who just think of socialism as a new and particularly horrible manifestation of man's wickedness (even though they consider "human nature" its greatest enemy), and more than a few regard it as a sort of apocalyptic horseman, ordained to punish the world for its unregeneracy. For others it is alarming enough that an economy sanctified by use and custom seems to be falling apart. Any change of the established order, they think, must be dangerous and wrong.

These are not all of the many and various who have accepted the idea that the socialization of industry is inevitable. Furthermore, they agree, happily or unhappily, that "it's too late now" to combat what certainly is an influence in human thinking. Are they right?

Henry George taught that in all his activities, including the production and distribution of wealth, man is governed by natural laws, laws which still apply no matter how he may combat them. Wealth, for example, when it is produced, will consist of rent, wages and interest, no matter whether it is distributed or to whom. He says also, as any student of *Progress and Poverty* should remember, *that it is never too late, so long as free men have access to the land.* If there is land, and men are permitted to work on it and to trade freely in the products of their labor, the forces of nature will work for them, not against them.

The supply of land is not infinite. We have come to the end of our homestead land in this country after a good many years of expansion of the margin of cultivation. In some parts of the country land which has borne crops in the past is being reforested. This means that a safety valve which so often has blown off the steam when we have ignored the forces of nature is with us no longer. But it does not mean that "it's too late" now to do anything about our economy. It means that now, more than ever before, we must take action to correct the faults in our political and economic system.

For a quarter of a century the Schalkenbach Foundation has shown what could be done by the teacher, the lecturer, the writer and the publisher, working together, to further the cause of freedom. The work is being expanded as far as resources permit. A good many years ago Tom Loftin Johnson, a utilities millionaire, came to Henry George and offered him financial assistance.

"It's all I can do," he said. "I know how to make money, but I'm no writer or lecturer; I'm no good at making speeches, so I'd be no good to you in politics. But I can make money."

Henry George thanked him gratefully. He knew only too well what a handicap the lack of funds could be. But he also suggested to Johnson that he try his hand at writing and at speaking in public, and that he keep his eyes open for political opportunities. Johnson's record later, as the famous reform mayor of Cleveland, proved the wisdom of this advice. Few of us

will ever hold public office, but there is no limit to what may be accomplished by the articulate Georgist in the shop, the office and the street. His task will never be finished, but surely the results will always justify his efforts.

And he will not be working alone. The word is being spread in many cities by associations and schools. Henry George's works go on selling year after year, although the amount spent in advertising them has necessarily been limited.

Perhaps the walls of the academic citadels are not so impregnable as they have seemed. Not long ago a college professor who has been teaching "textbook economics" for a good many years said to me rather ruefully, "Damn it, Crane, I'm beginning to wonder if Henry George wasn't right, after all!" Has a fifth column been started?

But our battle will never be won in lecture halls and debating clubs alone, and our forces must be more than calculators of percentages and plotters of utopias. Social institutions move forward only as public opinion changes. Dictators know this well, and always try to control school, church and press. We cannot do this, and would not if we could, but opinion is influenced in many ways, and wherever people meet. We can only expect to progress gradually, a step here and a step there, but our rank and file must be alert never to miss a possible step.

Some steps will be in the political field. Already a few men in office are at least not hostile to George's principles. As the number of such men grows, our task becomes easier. We must vote for, and support men of this sort, no matter what party label they carry.

To any who may think that it is too early for active political measures, I will say that it is fifty-three years since Henry George ran for the office of mayor of New York. It was his second attempt in a dozen years, and only death robbed him—and New York—of success.

His life and his death, what he said and what he wrote, should be an inspiring lesson to every one of us—that it is *not* too early, and that it is *not* too late.

* Burton Crane, brother of the author, a New York Times correspondent now in Formosa.