

GEORGE'S "MENAGE OF PRIVILEGE" It Was an Inevitable Book and It Fills a Gap That Yawned for It

By Ernest Crosby

The first thing that struck me on reading the "Menage of Privilege," by Henry George, Jr., (The Macmillan company) was that it was an inevitable book. It fills a gap that yawned for it. If Mr. George had not written it, somebody else would have had to—and it would not have been done so well. For several years all sorts of crimes have been laid at the doors of our financial rulers. The great coal strike stirred up the people and the general condemnation of the attitude of the coal-ring, who regarded themselves as irresponsible, heaven-sent depositaries for the people, on such terms as they might deign to grant, opened the eyes of the public to the fact that new theories and new practices, involving the dominance of a moneyed oligarchy, were surreptitiously making their way, and that, in so far as industry was concerned at any rate, our democracy was a good deal of an illusion. This seems to have been the beginning of an era of attack directed against Wall street and its magnates. Lawson began his long and desultory tirade, disclosing enough to disgust decent people, but, notwithstanding enormous promises, leading nowhere. The thieves of the Equitable fell out and it began to look as if honest men might some day come by their dues. The success of the magazine which published Lawson's installments on the "System" induced the other ten-cent monthlies to enter into competition with it and, today they are outdoing one another in exposing the methods of finance. To all these indictments there has been hardly a word of answer. Clearly the worst is true and the evidence goes on piling up, until it seems scarcely worth while to accumulate any more of it. It is safe to say that the whole business is rotten and it is a waste of time to make further tests. But what are we going to do about it?

What are we going to do about it? That is the question—and George's book is the first suggestion of an answer. He has done the obvious thing which no one else has thought of do-

ing. He has extracted the essence of all these revelations. He has brought together all facts that he could find bearing in any way upon the industrial situation. He has formulated the charges of tyranny made against trade unionism and discussed the proper limits and advantages of labor monopoly among the other monopolies. He has drawn a picture of the luxurious lives of the monopolists and their



families and of the new aristocracy which they are building up; of the corresponding deterioration of the masses from lack of proper environmental conditions; of the political activities of accumulated wealth and the subservience of courts and legislatures and the rise of government by injunction; of the prostitution of the press, the pulpit and the professor's chair; and of the new militarism and imperialism and the growing centralization of political power at Washington, as of industrial power in Wall street. This synthesis of existing condi-

tions Mr. George has accomplished with very great ability, and he has made a most interesting narrative which everyone having the welfare of his country at heart ought to read. There is nothing technical or prosy in the book, but it entertains the reader from the outset. Nor does he leave him in mid-air, as so many writers do. He does not harrow his soul with dismal pictures, all the more dismal because they are accurate, and then drop him without a hint of a practical remedy. With the clearest logic he shows what the real remedy is and what the true line of advance must be. He traces all these ills to their source in privilege and monopoly. He shows how the inordinate size of private fortunes today is due in every case to the possession by the owner of some unjust advantage over his fellows, conferred by tariff or franchise or unearned increment, and he passes on relentlessly to the conclusion that our only salvation lies in the speedy abolition of these privileges, which must be eradicated from the ground up, for any reform which leaves the foundation of the "system" intact will permit the same evils to grow up again.

Without some such conclusion as this the whole discussion of business graft will be fruitless. With the menace of privilege on one hand and the menace of an experiment in despotic and impossible socialism on the other, it almost seems as if no one had any business to write or to speak on these subjects without indicating the real reform, which is logically a necessity, namely the downfall of privilege. All monopoly—of taxation, of currency, of mineral deposits, rights of way and advantageous sites—are so many means of exacting tribute from the public. It is a question of industrial tribute, and industrial tribute is far more important than political tribute, because it enters into every transaction of life. Mr. George has a comprehensive mind, a ready pen and insight enough to discover the way out. The readers of The Democrat should lose no time in learning his interesting lesson.

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"The Menace of Privilege."

One of the most interesting contributions to current economic discussion is made by Henry George, Jr., in "The Menace of Privilege." His purpose is sufficiently indicated in the sub-title: "A Study of the Dangers to the Republic From the Existence of a Favored Class." Mr. George inherits the literary skill of his distinguished father. There is the same fluency, the same variety and the same nice choice of epithets. It is not quite so certain that he inherits his father's imagination; but he does display the paternal earnestness of purpose, conscientiousness and high devotion to ideals of industrial betterment; and, however one may differ with him as to the remedies he proposes for the evils to which he points, there can be no doubt that his statement of these evils is fair and timely.

He sees grave changes coming over the American republic—an extraordinary inequality in the distribution of wealth; the rise of class feeling; the growth of the aristocratic idea; the lapse from morals in business and the private relations among the very rich; the growth of elements of physical, mental and moral deterioration among the working masses; the appearance of militant trade unionism; the perversion of the injunction principle and the use of soldiers in strikes; the corruption of federal, state and municipal politics; the deterring of press, university and pulpit from an open expression; the centralization of government; the advances in foreign aggression. He says:

Such things did not exist at the foundation of the republic. Why should they now appear when we have grown so wonderfully in population and wealth? Why should this age contrast so unfavorably with that when the nation numbered less than our chief city contains? Something is rampant now that existed only in rudimentary form then. That something is "privilege."

His statement of the dangers and evils—for such evils are unquestionably dangers—is both lucid and brilliant. Briefly and boldly he shows how the monopoly of natural opportunities, heavy taxes upon production, private ownership of public highways and other lesser privileges cause certain inequalities in the distribution of wealth; and he indicates the processes by which this inequality in distribution creates in the community two classes, each clearly defined and each powerful, having distinct views as to the greatest good of the greatest number and feelings as to one another which he chooses to describe as "hostile."

Out of such conditions, he alleges, have risen "two great, belligerent elements: leagued privilege on the one side, labor unionism on the other. And he sums up his personal conviction in this virile sentence:

When privilege cannot make terms with labor unionism, by which it may peacefully rob the public, it makes war against it.

In enumerating the chief weapons of privilege he gives priority to soldiers and "an extraordinary development of the judicial enjoining order." He cites events and "forces visible to any who will look." He detects a tendency in all these factors toward the centralization of government and foreign aggression, and sees in the history of the republic "startling parallels with great nations which, after brilliant development, entered upon the path of ruin and death."

Up to this point Mr. George carries the average reader in sympathy, if not convinced. There is a feeling that his enthusiasm leads him at times to shoot beyond the mark. Not enough is made of the arguments to be urged against his position. With the best intentions to be impartial, he falls at times into grave misconceptions and sophistries. But, in the main, he utters the cry of those who have been "overborne by privilege," and we must pardon something to the spirit that rankles under the sense of injustice, be that injustice real or imaginary.

As the exponent of the economic doctrine associated with the name of his father, Mr. George naturally emphasizes the benefits of that doctrine in correcting these evils. Shift the entire weight of taxation from production to land values, he says, and then take all public highway functions into public hands, and the main causes of the unequal distribution of wealth will be removed.

After that, the destruction of the numerous secondary causes would follow, if Mr. George is correct in his theory. "American laborers would then think no more of organizing against 'capital,' as privilege is mistakenly called, than they would think of organizing against a race of men whose only records are a few scattered ruins and picture writings engraved on fragments of

stone." Mr. George has written a book worth reading.

("The Menace of Privilege," by Henry George, Jr. Macmillan.)

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