

THE EVENING POST

DURING 1871, Henry George also tried his hand at fiction, with "How Jack Breeze Missed Being a Pasha,"¹ which he published in *The Overland Monthly* together with an article "Bribery in Elections."² The latter was the first article to be published in the United States advocating the Australian ballot.³

Aside from this writing, George found nothing to anchor him in California and thought seriously of going to New York or Philadelphia to try to establish himself. And then, again, as if by magic, opportunity opened. A printer friend, William Hinton, came to him with the suggestion that they start a daily newspaper. The two men managed to get together \$1,800; and this plus the sale of delivery routes in advance, enabled them to launch the *San Francisco Evening Post*.⁴

There were no pennies in circulation on the Pacific coast; the nickel was the smallest coin in use. However, the proprietors of the *Post* were determined to publish a penny paper, following the example of successful dailies in the East. They persuaded the Bank of California to import one thousand dollars' worth of shiny new coppers from the Philadelphia Mint. When four of these pretty coins were handed back in change to the amazed citizens of San Francisco who had offered nickels for the new paper, the novelty served as an excellent advertisement.

The *Post* was free of political affiliations and was bold and fearless from the start. It caught on and won a respectful following. When the four-page paper was four months old an offer was made to buy it. The business manager, A. H. Rapp, who owned an interest, wanted to sell. George and Hinton consented and each received \$2,700 as his share. But under the new management, and without Henry George's pen to give it vigor, the little *Post* soon declined. After sixty days' struggle

the new purchaser offered it to George and Hinton for a nominal sum. They bought it back and it promptly recovered its strength.⁵ Less than nine months from its birth the paper had to be increased in size and its price advanced to two cents, then to five cents, as further expansion became necessary.

The *Post* was nearly two years old when John P. Jones, United States Senator from Nevada and a warm advocate of President Grant, approached the owners and offered to furnish them on their own notes enough money to buy the best press that could be obtained. Improved facilities for more rapid press work seemed a necessity. The *Post's* owners accepted the proposition and Hinton went East where, for \$30,000, he bought a Bullock perfecting press of the type George had seen in the plant of the *New York Sun*. The machinery was set up in the new office at 402 Montgomery Street, where the *Post* could boast the first perfecting press on the Pacific coast.

A party was held to celebrate the occasion. The new press was demonstrated to the guests, and for those who didn't mind climbing three flights of stairs, there was not only delectable food but plenty of California champagne and California tobacco.

The editorial office was on the top floor. There, in a small room containing the paper-cluttered desk, a crowded bookcase and a green baize covered sofa, worked the editor.⁶ Often smoking a cigar, George would dictate to his secretary, Stephen Potter, and while Potter transcribed his shorthand notes the editor would continue the article at his own desk, writing in longhand. This system enabled him to get through a vast amount of work in a short time.

The typewriter was just then coming into general use. George wanted one but the business department ruled against the investment. Since the typewriter company would not give one of its machines in exchange for advertising, the daily drudgery with the pen had to be continued. But George had the last word. One day, when the last news form crashed from the third-floor composing room to the press room in the basement and was reduced to printer's pi because the dumbwaiter rope broke (the weakness of this rope having been noted far in advance of the accident), the business department came in for a few pithy and well-chosen editorial remarks on "spigot-bung-hole economy."

George was inclined to absent-mindedness. Several times

young Potter, his secretary, met him on the street, standing on the edge of the sidewalk buried in thought and oblivious of his surroundings. On such occasions it was necessary to speak to him repeatedly before he heard.

In money matters he was not only liberal but careless. As the banking methods of both himself and his secretary were somewhat crude, the two hit upon the happy arrangement of using one of Potter's pockets for George's money to take care of petty cash transactions. If money, the origin of which could not be recalled, was found in this pocket, then it was tacitly assumed to be the editor's.

All through its existence the *Post's* editorials frequently advocated taxation of land values in lieu of all other taxes. This editorial policy was ridiculed by rival papers as "George's Fad." One of the critics printed a cartoon of the *Post* editor as a boy astride a stick, with whip in hand, galloping across a newspaper page in pursuit of airy phantoms. The cartoon was labeled "Harry George Riding His Hobby."

The policy of the *Post* was opposed to Grant and Reconstruction, advocating the nomination of Horace Greeley. George went as a delegate from California to the Democratic convention that met in Baltimore in June, 1872. After a visit to Greeley at his Chappaqua estate in West Chester County, New York, George rushed home to San Francisco to take up the fight for his candidate. "Grant," he wrote in an editorial on November 2, "represents the hatreds growing out of the war. . . . Greeley represents the spirit of reconciliation and magnanimity."⁷

But his candidate was beaten. George, sorely disappointed, turned again to a relentless hammering at the California "Octopus." He wrote much in this vein: "The interests of individuals, towns, cities, counties and the State and Federal governments have all been trampled upon and sacrificed to swell the gains of Stanford, Huntington, the Crocker, and some half dozen others belonging to the ring."⁸

Although his editorials were chiefly focused on municipal and state affairs, he was thoroughly aware of what was happening in the East. For instance, when attacking local corruption, he remarked, "Can the records of Tammany, or any other thieving ring, show a more outrageous case of jobbery! Boss Tweed and even the cormorants of Grant's Washington Ring might come out here to take a lesson!"⁹

Rumors that Vanderbilt might buy the Central Pacific Railroad provoked this editorial reaction:

Vanderbilt is even more grasping and tyrannical than Stanford ever was. . . . Has it [*The Call*, a rival] never heard of the wars of Vanderbilt with Fisk and Drew and with rival corporations, in which conventions were systematically packed, legislatures bought by wholesale, companies of bullies hired and even the bench retained? Does it not know that the great State of Pennsylvania is Tom Scott's pocket borough and that its legislature is so notoriously owned by the railroad king, that a member once got up and said: "If Tom Scott has no further business with this House, I move that it now adjourn"? If we do get Vanderbilt instead of Stanford, we are afraid that we shall look back to the latter as the frogs in the fable looked back to their King Log, after Jupiter, in answer to their prayer, had sent them a stork.¹⁰

And his alarm over the wanton manner in which public lands were being deeded away caused him to report: "Tom Scott and his railroad crowd are likely to get eight million acres of land in Texas under decision of the U. S. Supreme Court confirming the grants of the Memphis, El Paso and Transcontinental Railroad."¹¹

But the editorials in the *Post* were not concerned entirely with the railroad trust. George urged self-improvement for laborers, fought for shorter working days and reported the success of the eight-hour law in Australia, urging its adoption in the United States. "It is to political action," he explained, "that working men must look for the remedy for all their real grievances, for those are grievances which spring from bad laws."¹²

On another occasion he took up the cudgels for misused seamen. The *Post* became a champion of sailor's rights. It exposed the unbelievable cruelty of the captain and mate of the ship *Crusader* and later the officers of the *Sunrise*.

The latter ship arrived in San Francisco minus three seamen who had been aboard. These three, two men and a boy of seventeen, were foreigners who had been shanghaied. Goaded and tortured by the first mate and the captain, they had jumped overboard rather than remain on the hell-ship. The remaining members of the *Sunrise's* crew were able to talk. But for three days, in spite of long news accounts in the *Post*, in spite of George's appeals to the authorities and his flaming editorials,

no legal action was taken. "Then Editor George of the Post went before District Attorney Latimer and made affidavit upon information and belief, charging Captain Clarke and his two mates with maliciously beating and wounding Charles B. Brown, on the high seas."¹³ During the three days delay the first mate had disappeared. Now the *Post* offered \$400 for his arrest. Eventually he was caught and punished with the other officers of the *Sunrise* after an exciting though revolting trial.

The public was at last made aware of the hideous injustice done to sailors: their scurvy-producing food, their wretched pay, their slavery to commanding officers. As long as he held an editorial pen, Henry George fought for their rights.

He fought for women's rights, too. On July 2, 1872, he wrote:

We have long been a warm sympathizer with female school teachers in their contest to secure an equality of rights and compensation in pursuit of their noble calling. No arguments have yet been presented sufficient to convince us that women have not the capacity to fill the very highest positions in educational institutions, nor have we been able to see by what rule of right or principle of justice women should receive less pay than men for performing the same duties equally well. . . . The true rule is to open the ranks of competition without regard to sex. Let those who are best qualified be chosen, whether male or female.¹⁴

His strong belief in feminism was proved in behavior as well as in word. One day as he went home he saw his wife approaching from another direction. Catching sight of him she hurried up and explained, "I was delayed shopping. I'm sorry—I always like to be home waiting for you."

"Annie," he responded almost severely, "don't you ever talk that way again. Just why must you get home at a certain time? I don't possess you! Never put me in the position, even in your thought, of being your master, to whom you need give an accounting of your actions! I'm free to come and go as I see fit—and so must you be!"¹⁵

San Francisco was bitterly divided over the issue of women's rights. Women who solicited votes at local option elections were treated disrespectfully. The *Post* attacked their ungallant assailants, and this provoked the wrath of the saloons where much of the antifeminist agitation had its center. Henry George was quick to retaliate. He inspired an investigation of the liquor interests, and it was proved on analysis of samples of the liquor

sold in San Francisco that it contained large quantities of fusel oil. This was chronicled in the *Post* and made every saloon George's enemy.

As champion of the unfortunate and oppressed, the editor's position demanded physical as well as moral courage. George kept up his strength by swimming, rowing, and horseback riding. "When the George family was living out in the Mission, a suburban part of town, he concluded to buy a horse and ride to the *Post* office daily," recounts William Cleveland McCloskey.¹⁶ "It was the most extraordinary piece of horse-flesh imaginable. Small, bony, angular, a veritable old plug. Henry George certainly was a picture astride that beast, and many a jibe and joke was held at his expense over the old nag."

He had always been strong and fearless. One night, years before, when as a printer he had come home late at night, he found his wife quivering with fright. On that afternoon when the Chinese laundryman came for his pay he had tried to kiss her. He was the biggest Chinese she had ever seen, but somehow she had succeeded in shutting the door. Her husband quieted her fears. Not until long afterward did he tell her that alone he had gone to Chinatown and had sought out the laundryman. Delivering a blow powerful enough to knock the surprised giant flat, and flinging the pay on the sidewalk beside the prostrate figure, the enraged husband then stalked out of the Chinese quarter unmolested.¹⁷

Now as editor of the *Post* this same courage was needed as he campaigned against the powers of graft and corruption—"the ring." Month after month he fought for prison reform, for better food in prison, city hospital, and almshouse. He pled the cause of two small boys sent to the "Industrial School." They had stolen a valuable watch and sold it for two dollars, with which they bought candy. "It is a sin and a shame," wrote George, "that we have no public institution to which children who fall into crime from want of parental control can be sent with any hope of reforming them."¹⁸

Repeatedly he exposed the wicked methods used in this so-called reform school where the boys were underfed, inhumanly punished, and herded together in a way which turned those who were potentially good citizens into hardened criminals. He attacked the cruelty of the superintendent, George F. Harris, and expressed his humiliation that San Francisco should permit "the ring to re-elect their friend, the boy-torturer."¹⁹

Finally an investigation took place. The ferocious-looking Harris, his hand on his pistol, stood at the gate but according to Judge Robert Ferral, George, without the least hesitation, "walked right up to him, looked the burly ruffian straight in the eyes and passed into the yard without a word. All through that investigation Harris avoided the steady, indignant gaze of the brave little man who pressed his charges of brutality and drove him from his position and out of the city."²⁰

On another occasion George became indignant at the harsh way alcoholics were treated in San Francisco prisons and directed the attention of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to these unfortunates! Once, when he remonstrated with a policeman who was treating a drunkard brutally, the patrolman threatened to arrest him. Whereupon George said he would save him the trouble, and, exercising a citizen's prerogative, arrested the officer. Leaving the intoxicated man to his own devices the editor and the policeman marched to the station house and entered charges against each other.²¹

While working at his desk one day, George was disturbed by a turmoil in the street below. From his window he saw that the cause of the commotion was a drunken sailor, clad only in the scantiest of garments, who was hanging perilously by one hand from the bottom of a small iron balcony outside his lodging house window. His balcony and the editor's own balcony were fairly close together in adjacent buildings and almost on the same level. George rushed to the aid of the unfortunate man. Bending over his own balcony, he managed to clutch the sailor's wrists and to draw him up. The feat required strength and balance. Then one of the *Post's* printers, coming to George's assistance, grasped one of the drunkard's waving legs and helped lift him over the railing to safety.²²

The *San Francisco Evening Post* had been started in November, 1871. Because of its editorial policy, it had a grim financial struggle during the first two years. But installation of the new perfecting press lowered the cost of production and the *Post* grew in circulation despite the depression of 1873. Expansion seemed desirable. On August 20, 1875, the publishers launched the *Morning Ledger*²³ with "a mammoth eight-page Sunday edition"²⁴ which, beginning with the September 19 issue, carried news, editorials, theatrical criticism, book reviews, and illustrations.

Here, for the first time in journalism, was an illustrated

Sunday paper.²⁵ The editors refrained from soliciting advertisements, preferring to wait until advertisers should seek the paper.

Editing a morning as well as an evening daily meant so much work that on many nights George could not go home. Instead he slept—when he could spare the time to sleep—on the little green couch in his office. Sometimes, to keep himself going, he sent his secretary to the saloon at the corner for a bottle of “Cutter whiskey.”²⁶ Not being an habitual drinker, a little liquor quickly affected him. One night when he had promised to speak for Father Matthew on “Temperance” and had braced himself for the ordeal he arrived at the meeting in definitely inappropriate spirits. His speech began with a discussion of temperance but somehow veered off to the subject of economics and became an eloquent appeal for the abolition of one tax after another until there should be only one thing left to tax—land values. The speech was an instant success; even Father Matthew was pleased.²⁷ Eventually the editor obtained a more dependable tonic from his doctor.

Shortly after the launching of the *Morning Ledger* there was a great fire in Virginia City, Nevada, the mining center. Many San Franciscans were heavily involved, and a severe decline in mining stock and the suspension of payment by the Bank of California followed the fire. This resulted in a financial panic in San Francisco. Early in November, when it was impossible to collect money, George had to suspend the *Ledger*. At this point Senator Jones demanded the return of the money lent for the purchase of the new press or the surrender to him of the *Post*. George felt like fighting, for he knew that a statement of the situation from his pen, published in the paper, could kill its future with another editor, but considering the employees who would thereby lose their jobs, he refrained from writing the statement. And so, without a cent of compensation, on November 27, 1875, he and William Hinton gave over the paper to the representatives of Jones.²⁸

Henry George had loved the *Post*. It was the fruit of his labor. It had been an instrument for waging the fight against injustice, corruption, and privilege. It had been the source of a comfortable living after years of struggle. Now it was gone. And once again he was flat broke.