

CHAPTER IV

RUNAWAY MARRIAGE

WHILE George was still foreman on the *Home Journal* his friend Wilbur introduced him to Annie Fox, a young girl of seventeen. The friendship between the two speedily ripened into a warmer sentiment, and they became unofficially engaged. For a time their courtship pursued its placid course. They took quiet walks together; they exchanged books; they discussed their favourite authors. A popular publication of the time was Charles Dana's *Household Book of Poetry*, a huge volume containing extracts from the best English poets. The young couple secured this, pored over it together, and memorized their favourite poems. The affection of the warm-hearted intelligent girl was a precious consolation to George in his strenuous battle with hard circumstance. But the course of his love was not destined to run smoothly. The relatives of the lady felt small enthusiasm for the aggressive little printer. Annie Fox was an orphan. Her father was a British officer who married her mother in Australia. The marriage was not happy, and after two children had been born the couple separated. The father was never heard of again. The mother brought her two girls to her own father's house in San Francisco, where she died shortly afterwards. Annie lived first with her grandmother and then with an aunt, a Mrs. Flintoff, but her chief guardian was her maternal uncle, Matthew M'Closkey, one of the San Francisco pioneers, who had made a comfortable fortune from speculation in real estate. The M'Closkeys were Roman Catholics, and Annie was brought up in that faith. She received most of her education at a convent school in Los Angeles, and her sister became a nun.

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Unfortunately for George's chances of making a good impression on his sweetheart's family, his fortunes during his courtship were at an extremely low ebb. He was engaged in his hopeless struggle to make the *Evening Journal* a paying proposition. Annie was aware of his desperate financial condition. One day she paid a visit to the printing office of the *Journal*. George showed her round, and then pointing to a kind of folding cot with mattress and grey blankets, announced that this was his bed. The young girl could not help exclaiming, "I hope your mother does not know of this." His poverty made no difference to her, but naturally her guardians regarded the matter in another light. Matthew M'Closkey, a prosperous self-made man, looked with disdain on this threadbare suitor. Nor was his distaste diminished by the young fellow's opinionativeness and the tactlessness with which he contradicted his elders in argument. One day M'Closkey took the opportunity to tell him that until he could show more visible signs of ability to maintain a wife, he must make his visits to Miss Fox less frequent. This was just the sort of situation which George's temper made him totally unable to handle. Stung to the quick by the insult, he retorted angrily; a heated argument followed and the two men almost came to blows. The irate guardian forbade George ever to see Miss Fox again.

Despite this prohibition the lovers met next day. It was December 3, 1861, a momentous date in the lives of both. Annie was very depressed and spoke of going to Los Angeles to teach in a school there. George demurred. "If you go," he said, "I'll not see you again." Then, obeying a sudden impulse, he drew a coin from his pocket. "Annie," he said, "that is all the money I have in the world. Will you marry me?" It was not an attractive prospect for the young girl, but she bravely replied, "If you are willing to undertake the responsibilities of marriage I will marry you." In this inconsiderate fashion did these two foolish young people take the most important decision of their lives.

Once marriage was decided on, George, with his usual impetuosity, determined that there should be no delay.

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The marriage was to take place that very night, and Annie was to elope from her home. In great excitement the bridegroom ran off to borrow money and clothes, to arrange for rooms, and to secure a clergyman. No marriage licence was then required in California, so there was no legal obstacle to the immediate performance of the ceremony. At nightfall a carriage called at the Flintoff house. In it was Isaac Trump, one of George's *Shubrick* friends. By arrangement he inquired for "Miss Brown," and Annie appeared carrying a huge package which Trump thought must contain important valuables, but which really consisted of all the books of poetry which she and George had read together. This was the precious freight with which she took her flight. Some distance from the house the carriage picked up George, and the party adjourned for supper to a miners' restaurant, proceeding afterwards on foot to the Methodist Bethel, where the marriage was to take place. It was a bright moonlight night, but the streets were wet with rain. Whenever they came to a pool George gallantly lifted his bride in his arms and carried her across. At the church a small party of friends was waiting. Annie would have preferred to be married in a Catholic church, but for this George's impatience left no time. However, the minister obligingly read the Episcopalian marriage service, which, he explained, more nearly approached the Catholic than the one he was accustomed to use. Isaac Trump was one of the witnesses. When the clergyman asked him his name he replied promptly, "I. Trump." "I perceive you do," said the puzzled parson, "but please tell me your name." When the ceremony was over George walked off with his wife to the cheap boarding-house where he had taken a room for the night. There was no opportunity for a honeymoon. George was "subbing," and the next morning at five o'clock he had to go out and look for work. Fortunately he got a job for the day, and another in the evening which kept him busy till the early hours of the following morning. The money he earned paid his board-bill, but Annie, left solitary in the dismal surroundings of a third-rate boarding-house, must have found the first day of her married life bleak indeed.

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George was twenty-two at the time of his marriage, and his wife eighteen. Few unions could have held out smaller prospects of happiness. It was entered on with complete disregard of all worldly considerations, and dearly did the young pair pay for their rashness. The first few years of their married life were a long battle against poverty, not the genteel poverty which is behindhand with its bills, but the grim destitution which does not know where to turn for a meal. The responsibility for this unfortunate situation was George's. It was he who insisted on the hasty marriage, filled with blind rage against M'Closkey and burning to pay him out. We can sympathize with the young man's lacerated feelings, but he had no right to secure balm for his wound at the expense of a young girl's happiness. Unfortunately, George was not without a share of the egotism of genius. He was not deliberately selfish, but he was too engrossed in himself to take a proper view of the rights of others. Of all the youthful follies his headstrong nature led him to commit, his marriage was the least defensible. The only person who comes out of the transaction with any credit is Mrs. George. She uttered no word of reproach and bore without a murmur the unaccustomed hardships of her lot. Though brought up in comparative luxury and having never known what it was to work for her living, she bravely faced the realities of the situation and tried by sewing and other means to augment the slender family income. But for her wisdom, patience, and courage the little household would have foundered miserably in the storms of the next few years.

A few days after his marriage George was offered a job on a Sacramento newspaper, and the young couple betook themselves to the Californian capital. The town lay surrounded by gardens and cornfields at the junction of two great rivers which periodically overflowed their banks. Soon after their arrival the Georges had an experience of the terrible floods for which the district is notorious. The Sacramento burst its banks and poured its waters in a foaming torrent through the streets. George hurried home to warn his wife. Already the water had penetrated the

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lower rooms of their boarding-house, and they and the other guests had to escape on an improvised bridge of chairs. For weeks the lower parts of the town remained submerged. The Georges lived in the upper storey of their boarding-house, and George made his way daily to his printing-office over the roofs of the neighbouring houses. The community suffered the extremity of discomfort. Wash and bath tubs had to be used as rafts. Food and fuel ran short. The supply of liquor became exhausted—a severe privation to the sociable Californians. But as the summer drew on the waters subsided and life became more agreeable. To his family George wrote :

“ We are now living in one of the pleasantest parts of the town—a square from the State Capitol—and surrounded by trees of all kinds and the largest growth, and roses in greater profusion than I ever saw before. . . . A short distance from the house is the slough—formed by the backwater of the American River which unites with the Sacramento at this point—a beautiful sheet of water on which we have a boat, and over which we frequently sail. . . . Though I have a great deal of time on my hands, I do not think it is wholly lost. I employ it in the development of either body or mind, in rowing or swimming or in reading. Marriage has certainly benefited me by giving a more contented and earnest frame of mind, and will help me to do my best in ‘ whatever station it pleases God to call me.’ ”

Work on the newspaper was rather irregular. It depended on the transmission of news from the East. If the news did not come the paper did not appear. George had thus long spells of leisure. But when work was to be had he did not spare himself. Explaining his omission to write home for several weeks, he told his sisters :

“ I have been working steadily and literally nearly all the time. . . . Had not my necessities been so great, I would not have worked as I have during that time, for no one can do so for any time and retain good health.”

During periods of slackness he turned his hand to anything that offered. This brought him across the path of a

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famous figure. Mark Twain came to Sacramento to lecture, and George was employed to take the tickets at the hall door.

In November 1862 the first child of the marriage was born, a boy, called Henry after his father. By this time the Georges had given up "rooming" and started house-keeping. But whether from temperament or want of means, they seldom stayed long in one house. "We didn't clean house," said George afterwards; "we moved instead." For a time work on the paper was good, and George actually saved a little money, a rare thing for him. But he invested it in worthless mining shares and lost every cent. Not content with committing one folly, he proceeded to quarrel with his foreman and lost his job. In January 1864 the family was back in San Francisco without any means of livelihood. George fell back on "subbing," but work was so scarce that he was driven to try selling wringers on commission. Then Isaac Trump approached him with a proposal. The *Evening Journal*, George's old paper, had at last gone under, and there was a quantity of plant and type which could be acquired cheap. Trump's idea was to buy it and start a small job-printing office. George agreed and managed to raise the small sum which was his share of the capital. Another printer joined in, and the enterprise was launched. But George was never destined to be a successful business man. It was the story of the *Evening Journal* over again. The partners started their venture at a most inauspicious moment. A prolonged drought and a falling-off in the gold supply had spread depression through the state. Trade was bad and orders impossible to get. The partners slaved like niggers; they lived on 25 cents a day; they bartered printing for meat, milk, and firewood. Nothing was of the slightest use. The business went steadily downhill. Speaking of this period, George said afterwards:

"I came near starving to death, and at one time I was so close to it that I think I should have done so but for the job of printing a few cards which enabled us to buy a little corn meal. In this darkest time in my life my second child was born."

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The baby, a boy called Richard, came on a bleak January morning in 1865. As soon as the doctor saw him he said, "Don't stop to wash the child; he is starving. Feed him." George overheard this remark and left the house in a desperate frame of mind.

"I walked along the street," he related afterwards, "and made up my mind to get money from the first man whose appearance might indicate that he had it to give. I stopped a man—a stranger—and told him I wanted five dollars. He asked me what I wanted it for. I told him that my wife was confined and that I had nothing to give her to eat. He gave me the money. If he had not, I think I was desperate enough to have killed him."

This was the lowest point touched by the family fortunes. Shortly afterwards things began to mend. A cheaper house was secured, and Mrs. George was able to meet part of the rent by sewing for the landlady. George extricated himself from the ill-fated partnership with Trump and went back to "subbing." In a little diary which he commenced at this time he surveyed his position and made good resolutions for the future.

"Feb. 17, 1865. I am starting out afresh, very much crippled and embarrassed, owing over 200 dollars. I have been unsuccessful in everything. I wish to profit by my experience and to cultivate those qualities necessary to success in which I have been lacking. I have not saved as much as I ought and am resolved to practice a rigid economy until I have something ahead.

1. To make every cent I can.
 2. To spend nothing unnecessarily.
 3. To put something by each week, if it is only a five cent piece borrowed for the purpose.
 4. Not to run into debt if it can be avoided.
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1. To endeavour to make an acquaintance and friend of every one with whom I am brought in contact.
 2. To stay at home less and be more social.
 3. To strive to think consecutively and decide quickly."

These resolutions in the Benjamin Franklin manner had a tonic effect on the drooping spirits of the young compositor

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and nerved him to take up once more his heavy burden. His constancy was rewarded. By the spring of 1865 he had managed to get his head above water. Work became more plentiful and wages were good. The grim spectre of want was laid for a time. Most important of all, George had discovered a new way of adding to his resources. He had begun to write for the press.