

CHAPTER III.

LEARNS TO SET TYPE.

1856-1857.

AGE, 17-18.

ON getting back, home seemed very sweet to the boy on account of the loved ones and comforts, and the association of his boy friends. A year and a half afterwards, when he had gone to California, Jo Jeffreys, at that time the closest of his friends, wrote:

“Don't you recollect our Byronic quotations? Amusing weren't they? And yet I dare say we had more pleasure in those long moonlight nights spent in conversation—in counsel and reflection—than we had in a like number of hours at any other time. I remember well, too, how night after night we sat together and alone in your little room, smoking slowly and looking—sometimes at the little bed which was to contain us both and which rested in a corner near the door, at the little case of books on the bureau, at the dim gas-light which could so seldom be induced to burn brightly and which shed its dim light upon all around—and then turning from this picture, so familiar to me now (though I have never been in that room since, though often in the rooms beneath it), and gazing upon each other, would talk of the present and the future.”

In this little back-attic bed room all the boys at times gathered and talked about books or public affairs or boy-

ish amusements, and it was Henry George's habit, while engaging in conversation, to throw himself down on his bed, and frequently while the discourse was raging he would sink into placid slumbers. It was common enough for the family to see the boys come down stairs alone and hear the explanation: "Oh, Hen's asleep and we think it is time to go."

Thus the home life had much attractiveness for young George, yet he found it full of restrictions, for with all the heavy toil and hard discipline of sea life, there was during the preceding year and a quarter complete freedom of thought, and of actions, too, in the hours off duty. And now to come back to conditions where the most innocent of card-playing was regarded as an evil and riding in a public conveyance on Sunday as a desecration of the Lord's Day, made the energetic, masterful boy, or rather youth, for he was now in his eighteenth year, see new charms in the sea life; and for a time, all efforts failing in the search for employment ashore, his thoughts reverted to the water. Learning of this inclination, Captain Miller, before sailing on a new voyage in the *Hindoo*, wrote to him:

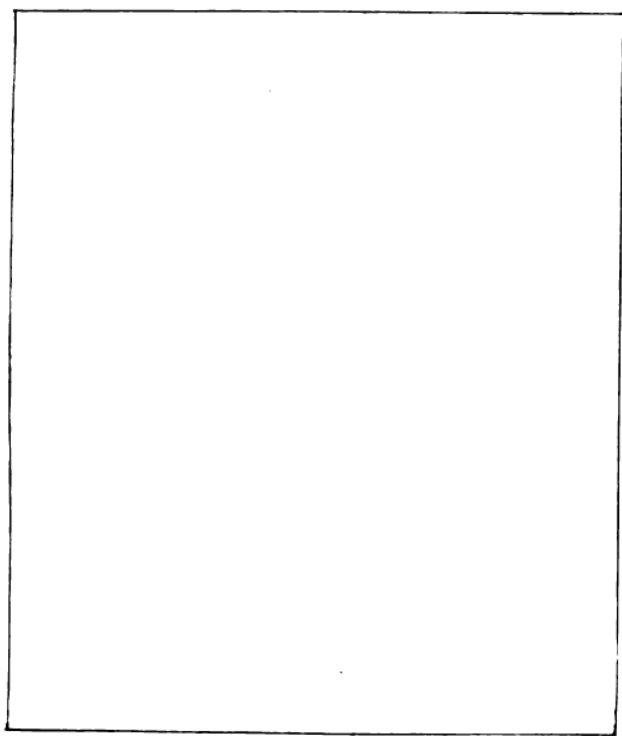
"I hope you will find some agreeable and profitable employment before long. Take my advice and never go to sea. You know of the troubles of a sailor's life before the mast. It never gets any better. A second mate leads proverbially a dog's life. The mate's and captain's are very little better."¹

¹This was probably the last letter he received from Captain Miller, and before the *Hindoo* had returned from her voyage and the captain had run on to Philadelphia, Henry George had sailed for California, so that they never again met. The captain died in Brooklyn, in May, 1877, in his forty-eighth year, and his friend, Rev. George A. Latimer, Henry George's cousin, officiating, was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, where Henry George himself, twenty years later, was to rest.

The boy's parents were most anxious not to have him again go to sea, and at last in the fall the father through his former book publishing connections obtained a situation for his son with the printing firm of King & Baird, at that time one of the important printing houses in Philadelphia. The father's idea in putting his son there was threefold: to keep the boy at home, to give him a trade and to teach him to spell. This latter short-coming in the boy was very conspicuous, requiring a second draft or fair copy of letters to insure the correct spelling of many even common words, as drafts of such letters that have survived show.

Learning to set type effected a marked improvement, and the printer's experience later in California perfected it. In after years his letter-writing at times revealed lapses in spelling, but these, as was manifest on the surface, arose from habits of abstraction.

This learning to set type marked another distinct step in the education of Henry George for his life work. Not that it lay so much in type-setting itself, or in correcting his spelling; but rather in bringing him into familiar contact with another field of human activity—among type-setters, who, as a class of men, if they belong to a trade, possess, as a rule, much correct general information and are given to habits of intelligent thought. Edmund Wallazz, who was a type-setter at King and Baird's in 1856, said in after years: "Henry George was a remarkably bright boy, always in discussion with the other boys in the office. He got in the habit of appealing to me (I am seven or eight years older) for support as to his dates and facts, historical and political." Thus through the channel of polemics he was acquiring knowledge of various kinds, and was also learning to observe and to present his thoughts. He had a habit of stowing away things in his memory that would have passed another—things that



Henry George when learning to set type in Philadelphia.

From daguerreotype, 1857.

in his matured years often found expression in his writings. To this period he assigned the first puzzling question in political economy. An old printer observed to him one day that while in old countries wages are low, in new countries they are always high. The boy compared the United States with Europe, and then California and Australia with Pennsylvania and New York, and the old printer's words seemed true enough, though neither the printer nor he could explain why. The thing stuck in his mind and kept rising for answer.

This propensity for investigating and arguing showed itself wherever he happened to be, when with old or with young, abroad or at home. As his Uncle Joseph Van Dusen said: "Henry is not tongue-tied."

For years stories of slave auctions in the South, friction over the return of runaway slaves in the North, the hot agitation of Garrison and Phillips in the East, and conflicts in "Bleeding Kansas" and through the West kept public thought seething. In 1850 appeared Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and later arose the Republican party with its anti-slavery proclivities and that in 1856 forced the issue and ran John C. Frémont for President. Though James Buchanan, the Democratic pro-slavery candidate, was elected, the new party had waged a fierce fight, and four years later was to elect Abraham Lincoln.

Young George soon after returning from sea showed a lively interest in the slavery question, and, although his father was a Democrat and inclined to support Buchanan, the boy independently took the anti-slavery side, which he discussed with his mother. In the interest of peace and of "property rights,"¹ and doubtless supported in

¹ "I was born in a Northern State, I have never lived in the South, I am not yet gray; but I well remember, as every American of middle age must remember, how over and over again I have heard all questionings of slavery silenced by the declaration that the negroes were the *property* of their

mind by what she regarded as the sanction of the Scriptures, she upheld slavery, not perhaps as a good thing in itself, but because of the great cost of disestablishment. The mother in repeating this conversation in after years to her son's wife said that in arguing she held that the hardships of slavery "were exaggerated," for, "while some of the slave owners might be brutal, the majority were not likely to be so," most of them doubtless being the same kind of "humanely-disposed people" as she herself. The boy stoutly held to his position and answered that her argument rested "on policy, not principle"; that she spoke of what slave owners "*seemed likely* to do," he of what they "*could* do"; "for if slaves were property, their masters, having the right to do what they pleased with their own property, could ill-treat and even kill them if so disposed."

The argument seemed sound enough to the parents, but the boy was still a boy to them. One night soon after returning from sea he came home late and his father reprimanded him. The boy hotly said that he was a child no longer and then went off to bed. Reflection cooled the father's anger. He realized that his son was, in mind at least, maturing to manhood, and that the reproof was not quite just or wise. He concluded that in the morning he would talk to his son about it. But when morning came the son was first to speak, saying that he had thought upon what had happened, and that while he regarded his conduct in remaining out as in itself innocent enough, he now recognised what he had not before observed—his father's right to object—and that being conscious of having been impudent, he asked his father's pardon. The

masters, and that to take away a man's slave without payment was as much a crime as to take away his horse without payment."—"The Land Question," Chap. VII. (Memorial Edition, p. 49).

father strained his son to his bosom and thereafter gave him more domestic freedom.

High strung and impetuous, Henry George was at this period prone to sudden resolves. From September, 1856, to June, 1857, he worked steadily at type-setting at King & Baird's, when one afternoon, having a quarrel with Mr. Scott, foreman of the job-room, he left the house's employ. When he told of what had happened, his father found for him an opening with Stavely & McCalla, printers, who offered \$2.25 a week for the first year, and afterwards as much as he could earn, providing he remained until twenty-one. The pay was so small that he hesitated. Just then a boy friend, John Hasson, sent word of a strike in the "Argus" newspaper office. George applied for and obtained employment. To Emma Curry, a girl friend, he wrote (June 29, 1857) explaining some of these matters:

"I left King and Baird's about two weeks and a half ago. I was learning nothing and making little (\$2 a week) when I left. The immediate cause of my leaving was that I would not quietly submit to the impositions and domineering insolence of the foreman of the room in which I then worked. Week before last I worked on the 'Daily Evening Argus.' The foreman of that paper and the members of the Printers' Union (who have full control of the various newspaper offices) quarrelled, and they refused to work unless the foreman was discharged. This the proprietor, Mr. Severns, refused to do, and the consequence was that the Union would not allow any of its members to work on the paper. The foreman had, therefore, to get printers who did not belong to the Union. I applied for a situation as a journeyman compositor and got it; but unluckily for me, at the end of the week the Union had a meeting and wisely supported the foreman by a large majority. This compelled the proprietor to discharge us

who were working there at the time and take on the Union men, who, having control of the other offices, could have put him to great inconvenience had he refused to do so.

"During the six days I worked there I made \$9.50, the largest sum of money I have ever made in the same time. I had also the satisfaction of seeing that I was but very little inferior to any of the journeymen, my bill for the week being as large as any of theirs, with the exception of a couple who had worked in the evenings also. I believe that I can set on an average of 5,000 ems of solid matter a day, including distributing and correcting, which according to the prices you tell me the printers get in Oregon, would be worth nearly \$4."

Emma Curry, her sisters, Martha and Florence, and their widowed mother, Rebecca D. Curry, had been neighbours of the George family. They had early in the year gone to Oregon Territory to join the widow's nephew, George Curry, who had been appointed Governor. Mrs. Curry was a bright, discerning woman. Her brother, William D. Kelley, from 1846 to 1856 was Judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia and afterwards represented one of the Philadelphia districts in Congress for almost thirty years and was commonly known as "Pig Iron" Kelley. Henry George had had many a long, earnest talk with Mrs. Curry, who took a deep interest in him. In a letter to her (April 3, 1857) he said:

"I am still at printing and am getting along very well, considering the time I have been at it. I should be able to make at least \$5 a week were I getting journeyman's prices, but that is impossible here. If you can find out and will be kind enough to write me the rates at which printers are paid in Oregon, I shall be able to tell exactly how much I could make there.

"I commenced last evening to take lessons in penmanship, and if all the old fellow (I mean teacher) says is true, by the time I write my next letter to you my chirography' will be so much improved that you will hardly recognise the hand. I have taken your advice and am trying to improve myself all I can. I shall shortly commence to study book-keeping. After I get through that I shall be Jack of three different trades, and, I am afraid, master of none.

"I am still of the same determination in regard to going West. . . . I only wait for your promised account of Oregon, and advice, to determine where and when I shall go."

Before receipt of his letter, Mrs. Curry had already written (April 19):

"We talk and think of you a great deal and I have talked with Mr. Curry [the Governor] about you. He says, 'Do not go to sea, but come here.' He will see what you can make at your business at Salem. He thinks you may do well. He will inquire as soon as possible, and I shall write you. Everything pays well here. He is giving a boy \$20 a month for hoeing, chopping wood, washing a little and bringing up the cattle. A man was paid by him in my presence \$25 for ploughing from Tuesday noon till Friday noon. Give all attention to your business and you will, I trust, be successful. It is best to have that at your command."

Emma Curry wrote in a similar strain, and to her the boy replied (June 29):

"Give my thanks to the Governor for the trouble he has taken in my behalf and for the information which he has communicated to me through you. Your statement of the prospects that I may anticipate in Oregon has decided me. I *will* go out as soon as possible

and in the best manner possible, even if I am obliged to work my way around the Horn—unless by a lucky windfall I shall get into some business.”

But the “lucky windfall” in Philadelphia showed no signs of coming. The boy vainly looked for permanent employment. He obtained a position on a weekly paper called “The Merchant,” but this proved only temporary, and he became restless and thought the more earnestly of Oregon, and also of California, where he had a cousin, son of his Uncle Dunkin George. But these places seeming remote, again he thought of the sea, if only as a means of livelihood for the time being. He probably was the more restless because of the reaction from the old home rigorous beliefs and restraints. A blank book with some diary entries covering a few days during this period contains this:

“Tues. July 3. Saw Jo Jeffreys in afternoon. In evening Bill Jones and I took Sallie Young and Amelia Reinhart to the Academy of Music. But Sallie Young deserted me there and went with Bill Jones. Curse these girls; they won't fool me so confoundedly again. After taking them home we adjourned to Stead's [cigar store], where Bill Horner was awaiting us. As we came down we stopped at Cook's and Bergner's [taverns]. Coming up again, we serenaded Charlie Walton with the national anthem, after which Bill left us. Horner and I again repaired to Stead's, where after a little while we were joined by Jo and a friend of his, John Owen, by name. They, together with Ebenezer Harrison [a young Sunday School teacher], had been enjoying themselves in Owen's room, drinking punches and making speeches. At the corner of Sixth and Walnut Jo and I commenced to box, when Jo fell down and cut his head awfully. We raised him up, took him to Owen's, washed his wound and then set off to find a doctor. We dragged

him around for about two hours before finding any person who could dress the wound. At length we took him to a German physician, who dressed the cut and charged a V for his trouble. We left him at Owen's and returned home about daybreak."

It was at this time that the boys—Jeffreys, Jones, Horner, Walton, Harrison, George and the others—formed "The Lawrence Literary Society" and met in a small building which once had been a church. Two original essays by "Hen" George are still preserved, one on "The Poetry of Life" and the other on "Mormonism," a very hostile view. There also exists a contribution from the pen of Charley Walton treating of the wide-spread industrial depression then prevailing and ascribing its rise to "extravagance and speculation which have since the revolution characterised the American people."¹ But starting with this self-improving literary idea, the "Lawrence" came in the course of things to have other characteristics which Walton later described in a letter to "Hen" (July 29, 1863):

"I have often thought of the time gone by when the 'Lawrence' in Jerusalem Church was in its palmy days. . . . Can you or I forget the gay, refreshing and kindred spirits that formed that association and gave it a character so unenviable and noticeable as eventually to cause it to be ordered out peremptorily; its sympathy with ghost stories, boxing gloves, fencing foils and deviltry; its exercises tending to promote muscular rather than literary abilities; and its test of merit and standard of membership—to drink Red Eye, sing good songs and smoke lots of cigars?"

¹ This essay covers four pages of paper, the first page evidently written with great care, and the last with great carelessness, the whole terminating with the ejaculation, "Thank God, I'm done!"

But however innocent all this may have been, the fact of knowing anything whatever about liquor or of card playing was significant of the break-down of the old home influences; and it partly explains, with the loss of employment and the ambition to be independent, the return of a desire for the sea. At any rate, Henry George embarked on a topsail schooner laden with coal and bound from Philadelphia for Boston. Often afterwards, even towards the end of his life, he spoke with pride of the compliments he received on that voyage. For when he applied as ordinary seaman, the captain measured him with something like contempt and asked what he could do.

"I can handle, reef and steer," was the answer.

"You can't steer this schooner," returned its commander, "but nevertheless I'll try you."

Notwithstanding George's short stature and light weight, the captain found him so useful that at the end of the voyage he paid him off at the full rate of an able seaman, saying that he had been of as much use as any man aboard.

The outlook ashore seemed even worse when he got back from this short schooner trip, as may be seen from a letter to one of his young friends (B. F. Ely, September 30):

"The times here are very hard and are getting worse and worse every day, factory after factory suspending and discharging its hands. There are thousands of hard-working mechanics now out of employment in this city; and it is to the fact that among them is your humble servant, that you owe this letter. If you will send on without delay the V. you owe me you will be doing the State a service by lessening the pressure of the hard times upon one of the hard fisted mechanics who form her bone and muscle, and will at the same time be easing your conscience of a burden, which I have little doubt bears heavily upon it.

" . . . I am pretty hard up at present and haven't as much money as you could shake a stick at. Indeed, I would not have any hesitation in taking a situation on board a good canal boat for a short time, provided that it would pay.

"I have been trying for some time to secure a berth on board the United States Light-house Steamer *Shubrick*, now fitting out at the Navy Yard for California; but she will not sail for two weeks at least, and even then it is very doubtful whether I can succeed and go out in her.

"There is a ship loading here for San Francisco on board of which I have been promised a berth, but in the present stagnation of business it is doubtful whether she will get off before a month or two at least. So that you see I am in a pretty bad fix, having at least two weeks of loafing to look forward to."

Subsequently (October 5) he wrote a letter to Congressman Thomas B. Florence of his district asking his support.

"I have long wished to go to Oregon, where, if I may believe the many assurances I have received, prospects of fortune are open to me which it would be vain to hope for here. But as it is impossible for me to raise means sufficient to defray the expenses of a passage, I must strive to adopt the only plan practicable, and work my way out.

"The Light-House Steamer *Shubrick* will sail in a couple of weeks for California, where she is to be employed. I have been waiting for her for some time, hoping to get a chance to go in her; but I now learn from good authority that in all probability only a few able seamen will be shipped for her, in which case I would be unable to do so, unless I can obtain permission to ship from the Light-House Bureau.

"I have been to sea before, and am competent to ship as ordinary seaman or first class boy.

"If you would be kind enough to write to the proper

authorities at Washington in support of my application, it would be of great assistance to me in obtaining their permission."

Much to his delight, he not only was accepted for the *Shubrick*, but received the appointment of ship's steward, or storekeeper, at forty dollars a month; though like every one else on board, he was compelled to sign the ship's articles for one year's service, and not for the voyage to California alone, which was all that he wished to do. On December 22, 1857, he said farewell to his loved ones, and the little vessel under Commander John DeCamp of the U. S. Navy steamed down the Delaware River and started on her long journey around the southern extremity of South America.