

CHAPTER V.

AT THE FRAZER RIVER GOLD FIELDS.

1858.

AGE, 19

WHEN the *Shubrick* glided through the Golden Gate and cast anchor, it was with mixed emotions that Henry George gazed about him. California, bursting on the world ten years before with her astonishing gold discoveries, had now begun to reveal to the prospectors who found that the mineral regions had meanwhile been occupied, a new wealth of soil in her amazing agricultural fecundity. She had now been for eight years a State in the Union, and had a population of about three hundred and fifty thousand, of which her chief city, San Francisco, claimed some fifty thousand.

Like a new Eternal City, San Francisco nestled upon a cluster of hills. These hills rose on a narrow spur or peninsula, washed on the west by the ocean and on the east by the bay; and on the north formed one portal of the Golden Gate. The bell in the little pioneer adobe church of the missionary Franciscan monks still tinkled at the "Mission Dolores," and though many substantial buildings had arisen since the entrance on Statehood, the city for the most part still consisted of "cloth and paper shanties." The whole world was sending the flower of youth and energy into the new city; and to the young

and bold and adventurous of spirit, San Francisco, for all her newness and roughness, wore a charm, and even fascination, that only they could understand. Should Oregon fail, this, to Henry George, seemed the place to seek his fortune.

He had expected on reaching San Francisco to find a letter from Mrs. Curry telling him of the Oregon prospects, and perhaps inviting him to come up. When a letter came to hand, several days after his arrival, it contained no information on this subject and gave no counsel, and to it he replied (May 29, 1858):

“About an hour after we dropped anchor my cousin, Jim George, came on board. I went ashore with him and spent the day. He has his family here and is doing well. Although we have been here but a short time, yet I have already seen a good deal of the city and agree with Emma that ‘it is a dashing place,’ rather faster than Philadelphia.

“My mind is not fully made up as to what I shall do. I should feel grateful for your advice. Please write to me as soon as possible. If you still think I can do well in Oregon I will go up as soon as I can procure my discharge from the ship, which I hope to do in two or three weeks. I do not think I shall remain where I am at present, as I wish to settle down as soon as possible; and the old Oregon fever has not entirely died, as you may judge from the fact that I write from San Francisco. I have worked hard and long to get here and have at last succeeded, and I feel convinced that the same spirit will carry me through.”

The “Cousin Jim George” referred to was son of Henry’s Uncle Dunkin, his father’s only brother. James George was book-keeper for the retail clothing firm of J. M. Strowbridge & Co., doing business at Commercial and Sansome streets, and composed of Jerome and W. C.

Strowbridge and E. F. Childs. Childs had a young brother-in-law there named George B. Wilbur, a Rhode Island Yankee, who had gone to California with the hope shared by almost everyone going there—of finding a fortune. Wilbur and Henry George became acquainted, and Wilbur showed the newcomer around town; thereby beginning a friendship that was to be of mutual use in the near years, and though their aptitude and careers became distinct, was to last to the end of life.

And now since the prizes ashore seemed large and many for him who was free and could move quickly, young George had resolved not only not to remain at sea, but not even to embrace the prospect of a place in the Navy Yard at the head of the bay, which Commander DeCamp, who expected to be stationed there, had talked of helping him to get. Though he had no fixed plans, yet it was the boy's wish to be free, and free at once. The obstacle was the *Shubrick's* shipping articles, which he, like everyone else on board, had been compelled to sign at Philadelphia for one year's service, and which would hold him until November 11, 1858. He talked the thing over with Ellen George, James George's wife, a warm-hearted, sympathetic woman, who showed a lively interest in the youth's affairs. It was agreed that he should go into retirement for awhile, seeking the seclusion of a bed at her house, while she should confer with Commander De Camp, which she did. The Commander, as a consequence, failed to notice the absence of the boy, who, after a short season of this retirement, regarded himself as free of the *Shubrick*¹ and at liberty to go where he would. But as yet

¹ Though the *Shubrick's* record shows that later on there were a number of desertions among the officers and crew of the vessel, there is no indication whatever as to when Henry George left, or that he did not remain until the expiration of his term of service — Nov. 11, 1858.

no word of encouragement came from Oregon; nor in San Francisco, though he looked about him, did any inviting opening appear, so that he was left in idleness, consuming his little store of money consisting of wages earned on the *Shubrick*. All the while letters were coming from home which yet had a strong influence over him. From his mother (April 3, 1858):

“There is nothing stirring or startling in this great city. Religion seems to be the all-engrossing subject. Christians are looking for great results from this out-pouring of the Spirit. Look to Jesus, my dear child.”

From his mother (May 3):

“O my dear boy: how much you occupy my thoughts. Sleeping and waking your whereabouts, your doings, your comfort, your conduct, your prospects and a thousand other things fill my mind. Away from all you love and those who love you and would counsel you, O seek, my child, that wisdom that cometh from above. Then you will need no other counsellor.”

From his father (May 18):

“We have accounts to-day that Brigham Young, the Mormon scamp, has submitted to the United States authority and that forces are entering Salt Lake City. I hope it may be true. I should like to see him punished for his rebellion.”

From his Sister Jennie (June 3):

“I dreamed of you, Henry, not long ago for three nights in succession, and I thought each night that you had returned home. I thought I came home from school and saw you sitting in the rocking chair in the

front parlour. I ran to you and just as you kissed me I woke up. I was glad that I was in time for the kiss anyhow."

The same intense affection that Henry George kindled in the friends of his manhood was shown for him by the friends of his youth. The evidence of this on the part of Jeffreys we have already seen.¹ A letter from Jennie George (July 2) tells about Charlie Walton:

"Charlie Walton came around the other evening. . . . He said that you had written four or five letters to Jo Jeffreys and but one to him. I never saw him in such a rage. He really almost cried. I pacified him as much as I could and he went away a little cooler than he came. I really believe he thinks more of you than any of the other boys."

This from Edmund Wallazz who had been a printer in King and Baird's and who was now a man of about twenty-seven (July 15):

"Your letters dated the 15 and 19 ult., received this morning. . . .

"To understand my feeling of a peculiar relation existing between us I will mention the feelings which I experienced when we first heard of the yellow fever on board the *Shubrick*. Jeffreys told me of the report and of your father's fears near midnight of a day, I think, in the latter part of February or the early part of March. I was at first stunned; a cold, chilly sensation overpowered me for a few minutes; but after awhile I said, with an earnestness which made Jeffreys look surprised: 'Harry is not dead. If he were I should know it.' He asked if I believed in ghosts. Of course not, in the vulgar idea of ghosts. And yet I felt certain

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that if you were dead I should be informed of it. Nay, more. So strong was this feeling that for several days I sat alone in the dark at midnight waiting for you. And in those hours of terrible suspense how often did I think of your probable death, and picture your poor body tossed about by the billows of the Southern Atlantic, far, far from all who loved you! Firmly, I believe, if you had been dead, and if you had come to me, I would not have been frightened at all, only awe-struck, and it may be heart-wrung, by the thought that my advice had much to do with your going. But let this rest forever now. You cannot doubt my love; I cannot doubt yours."

But now Henry George was ready to act. For in June had come the thrilling news of large gold discoveries just over the American line, in the British possessions, on the Frazer River, not far from its mouth. There was much excitement in San Francisco, especially among that multitude of prospectors and adventurers, who, finding all the then known placer lands in California worked out or appropriated, and not willing to turn to the slow pursuits of agriculture, had gathered in the city with nothing to do. A mad scramble for the new fields ensued, and so great was the rush from this and other parts that fifty thousand persons are said to have poured into the Frazer River region within the space of a few weeks. Indeed, all who did not have profitable or promising employment tried to get away, and the *Shubrick's* log shows that most of her officers and crew deserted for the gold fields.¹

¹ "There is no mystery as to the cause which so suddenly and so largely raised wages in California in 1849, and in Australia in 1852. It was the discovery of placer mines in unappropriated land to which labour was free that raised the wages of cooks in San Francisco restaurants to \$500 a month, and left ships to rot in the harbour without officers or crew until their owners would consent to pay rates that in any other part of the

James George was doing well with the San Francisco clothing house, but caught in the gold excitement, he thought he saw a chance for a fortune in the sale of miner's supplies; and he formed a co-partnership with O. F. Giffin, of San Francisco, a dealer in nuts, dried fruits, etc., doing business on Front Street, between Sacramento and Clay. The agreement was that James was to go to Victoria, on Vancouver's Island, just off the mouth of the Frazer, and open a miner's supply store.

This project of James George's had much attractiveness for Henry George, but he resolved to be cautious and not venture on reports that might prove to be false. To Martha Curry, who now had become Mrs. Malthrop, he wrote (June 29):

"I have left the steamer I came out in and am now staying at the same house as my cousin. In all probability I will be able to get employment of some kind in a few days. I think I shall stay here until next spring, and then, if the diggings on Frazer River turn out to be as good as reported, I shall go up there. . . .

"Messrs. Byron and Pipe are both well, though rather the worse for their long journey and long handling."

A few days following this came a letter from Mrs. Curry (July 9) that ended all present thought of Oregon and increased that of the Frazer River. "As for this place," wrote she, "business is dull. The mines seem to be the all-absorbing theme." So with hope of Oregon closed and with no chance of work offering in San Francisco, the

globe seemed fabulous. Had these mines been on appropriated land, or had they been immediately monopolised so that rent could have arisen, it would have been land values that would have leaped upward, not wages." — "Progress and Poverty," Book V. chap. ii (Memorial Edition, p. 290).

young man found himself urged along the line of his inclinations—toward the Frazer; and with the promise from his cousin James of employment as clerk in the store, should he fail at the diggings, Henry George's hopes burned high and he wrote home of golden expectations. But the news of his starting for Victoria carried something like dismay to the quiet home in Philadelphia. His mother wrote (August 15) :

“I think this money-getting is attended with too many sacrifices. I wished it all in the bottom of the sea when I heard of your going to Victoria, but since it has been explained to me I feel better. . . . I shall never feel comfortable until you are settled down quietly at some permanent business. This making haste to grow rich is attended with snares and temptations and a great weariness of the flesh. It is not the whole of life, this getting of gold. When you write explain about the place and how you are situated. Then we will look on the bright side.”

A month later (September 18) she wrote:

“We all feel happy and thankful that you have arrived safely at Victoria and that your prospects appear bright. Don't be too anxious or too sanguine. This making haste to be rich I am afraid of. Remember you are but young. We do not expect great things as yet. You have just passed your nineteenth birthday. Did you think of it, or were you too busy? If you had been home we would have had a jollification. What a kissing time there would have been, playing Copenhagen and so forth. Hen, kissing is quite out of the fashion since you left; no kissing parties at all, I believe.”

His father in the same letter wrote:

“Your letter from Victoria came safe to hand and you may be sure we were glad to receive it. I had be-

come quite anxious about you, inasmuch that your last letter gave us the information that you were off on a trading expedition. I did not know how you would be situated, but now I feel more reconciled and think that your chances are fair. But I hope you will not build your castle in the air. Fortunes are not to be made in a hurry; it takes time and application. However, I say again, your prospects are fair. Nurse your means and use all the economy you can and I think in the end a fortune will be sure. Still, my dear son, consider; contentment is better than both hands full with labour and travel."

Henry George, working his way as seaman on a top-sail schooner, reached Victoria when the excitement was at the flood. That place, established in 1843 as a trading-fort of the Hudson Bay Company—those pioneers of commerce through the north-western part of the continent—and beautifully situated on Vancouver's Island in the majestic Puget Sound, had, with the gold discoveries, suddenly swelled in population, until it was estimated that at times ten thousand miners, in sheds and tents, gathered about the more substantial structures.

Henry George arrived at Victoria when the river, still at the season that rains and melting snows on its great mountain water-sheds swelled high its volume, came tearing down its long, twisting course and rushed through its rocky gorges like a roaring flood of destruction, earning the name sometimes given it—"The Terrible Frazer." The gold had been found at Yale and Fort Hope, a hundred miles up stream, in the exposed bars and the bed of the river when the water was low, so that with the water in flood, all gold-seeking operations had to come to a standstill and there was nothing to do but to wait until the water had subsided. The young fortune hunter, therefore, went into James George's store.

The store was in a rough wooden structure of one story and an attic, or rather loft. It stood on Wharf Street, beside the Victoria hotel, facing the harbour. Henry George worked very hard there. Part of the time he slept in the loft, reaching it by a ladder. He fastened a note outside the street door inviting customers who came out of the regular hours to "Please give this door a kick." In a letter to his Sister Jennie subsequently from San Francisco (December 6, 1858) he said:

"You innocently ask whether I made my own bed at Victoria. Why, bless you, my dear little sister! I had none to make. Part of the time I slept rolled up in my blanket on the counter, or on a pile of flour, and afterwards I had a straw mattress on some boards. The only difference between my sleeping and waking costumes was that during the day I wore both boots and cap, and at night dispensed with them."

But the full picture of his condition was not at once revealed to the folks at home. He had on starting for Victoria written of such large expectations that pride now prevented him from saying more than he could help about the poor results. Jo Jeffreys wrote (October 3):

"There is one remarkable thing in your letters, or rather *not* in your letters, which is this, that you fail to say whether you are prospering *at all* in your present business, or even if it supports you, and which I certainly should be glad to hear."

From his Sister Carrie (October 4):

"How I should like to see you in your new situation. Your account of your cooking is quite laughable. I should just like to look in upon you while you were thus engaged and see what kind of a cook you make."

His father wrote him a letter containing worldly wisdom (October 4) :

"We have all sorts of things going on here in Philadelphia. On the first of September we had the grand Ocean Telegraph celebration, though the cable has never spoken since, and I have great doubts that it ever will. Yet a great thing has been accomplished; or at any rate, if the practicability of a lightning rod through the ocean be not accomplished in my day, it will be in yours.

"Uncle Joseph Van Dusen took dinner with us yesterday. He seems much pleased with your present prospects and bade me when I wrote to say that if this thing should be successful their house would be glad to send you a load of goods direct which would cost much less than at San Francisco. About that I do not know—I mean as regards cheapness. You know Uncle Joseph and his partners. Show them where they can invest safely and profitably and they have the means and the nerve. This information may in the future, if this thing succeeds, be of great advantage to James and yourself. Recollect old John Sharp's advice: 'When thee makes a friend use him and keep him.'

"We are all well. Tom [one of Henry's brothers] is just promoted in school and is making very good progress. He is sharp, and will, if spared, make a smart and active man. I don't think I told you of his Fourth of July speech at dinner. When we were about half through Tom rose and said: 'Ladies and Gentlemen: This is the first time in my life that I have sat down to a Fourth of July dinner without ice-cream. I will, therefore, put the question. All who are in favour of ice-cream will please say, aye.' Of course it was unanimously carried, to the joy of all present. After he found it so, he very gracefully turned to me, saying: 'It is carried unanimously, Mr. Chairman. Will you please advance the money?' I could not get out of this, and put up fifty cents, which proved to be satisfactory."

Ferdinand Formhals, now a well-known citizen of San Francisco, who had charge of a stove and tinware store beside James George's store on Wharf Street, Victoria, says that he knew Henry George there, and that "George had nothing to say about the single tax or political economy then." Yet that the youth's mind was even then quietly at work is proved by a speech he made in San Francisco thirty-two years later:¹

"Let me, since I am in San Francisco, speak of the genesis of my own thought. I came out here at an early age, and knew nothing whatever of political economy. I had never intently thought upon any social problem. One of the first times I recollect talking on such a subject was one day, when I was about eighteen, after I had come to this country, while sitting on the deck of a topsail schooner with a lot of miners on the way to the Frazer River. We got talking about the Chinese, and I ventured to ask what harm they were doing here, if, as these miners said, they were only working the cheap diggings? 'No harm now,' said an old miner, 'but wages will not always be as high as they are to-day in California. As the country grows, as people come in, wages will go down, and some day or other white men will be glad to get those diggings that the Chinamen are now working.' And I well remember how it impressed me, the idea that as the country grew in all that we are hoping that it might grow, the condition of those who had to work for their living must become, not better, but worse."

But now something caused a falling out between the cousins. What the trouble was does not appear, though in after years Henry George said that he had "behaved badly towards Jim George." The offence could not have been grave, as they were on the old friendly terms soon again in San Francisco. But however this may be, Henry

¹ Metropolitan Hall, Feb. 4, 1890.

left James' employ and went to live in a tent with George Wilbur, who had come up from San Francisco to dig gold. Wilbur had since his arrival made an unsuccessful trip up the river, but was determined to try again. Meanwhile he was driving a water cart for a living. Henry George proposed to go up the river with Wilbur, but before they could set off they were daunted by the stories of failure that returning miners were bringing down. While in this wavering state of mind, Ferdinand Formhals gave Henry George information that caused him to abandon the project. Formhals was something of a chemist and had from curiosity been analysing some of the samples of "pure gold from the river" that were being handed about, and found them to be a mixture of tin, lead and other metals. He believed that there was some gold at the diggings, but only a little—not enough to be worth searching for. Time has confirmed Formhals' judgment, comparatively little gold having at any time been taken out of this part of the Frazer River, the really rich deposits being found in the Cariboo region, several hundred miles farther up; but these places were not discovered for a number of years afterwards.

Hope of finding a fortune at the diggings thus closing before him, and having no other employment, and for that matter without prospect of any at Victoria, Henry George decided to return at once to San Francisco, and when there, should no opening offer, to take again to the sea, and keep to it as a calling. With this determination, he borrowed enough money from George Wilbur and others to buy steerage passage down to San Francisco. George Wilbur says of the setting off:

"He had no coat; so I gave him mine. An old fellow named Wolff peddled pics among the tents, and

thinking that Harry would enjoy these more than the food he would get aboard the ship, we bought six of them, and as he had no trunk, we put them in his bunk, and drew the blanket over them so that nobody would see them and steal them. He wrote me from San Francisco when he got down that the first night out he was so tired that he threw himself down on his bunk without undressing, and that he did not think of the pies until the morning, when he found that he had been lying on top of them all night."