

CHAPTER VI.

TOSSED ABOUT BY FORTUNE.

1858-1859.

AGE, 19-20.

TOWARDS the end of November, 1858, Henry George arrived at San Francisco from Victoria "dead broke." And now commenced a stretch of years notable for a restless pitching about, with shifting scenes of prosperity and adversity—years, though, that showed progress, if irregular and jolting.

This period opened with soft sunshine, for as the impecunious youth walked the streets, meeting only strange faces and getting only rebuffs when he applied for work, and when his mind had again turned to the sea as a means of livelihood, he came face to face with David Bond, a compositor whom he had known at King & Baird's printing house in Philadelphia. Learning of his plight, Bond took him to Frank Eastman's printing office and got him employment to set type. The next letter home breathed of prosperity. To his Sister Jennie (December 6) he said:

"I am at present working in a printing office and am, therefore, busy all day, and the evenings I spend in reading, unless (as is often the case) I go to see Ellie George.

"After being deprived of reading for such a time,

it is quite delightful to be able to read as much as I wish. In the house in which I am stopping there is a good library, which to me is one of its prominent attractions.

"I am glad that you are so nearly through school. How would you like to come out here and teach? Teachers here get very good pay, the lowest—the A, B, C, teachers—getting \$50 per month; the principals, \$200. Ellie George gets \$100 a month. Lady's board costs from \$25 to \$30 per month.

"Women are sadly wanted here. In Victoria there are hardly any, and you can plainly see the effects of the absence of women on society at large.

"I have few acquaintances either here or in Victoria—I mean boys or men. Don't on any consideration think I have thought of girls, for I haven't seen one to speak to, save those I told you about, since I left Philadelphia. But I suppose in some respects it is much better, as I spend less money.

"I am boarding now, and have been for these past two weeks in the 'What Cheer House,' the largest, if not the finest, hotel in the place. I pay \$9 per week and have a beautiful little room and first rate living.

"I get \$16 per week the way I am working now, but will soon strike into something that will pay me better. . . .

"I suppose you have all grown somewhat since I left. I have not changed much, except that I am even uglier and rougher looking. You thought I looked hard when I came home from Calcutta, but you should have seen me in Victoria!

"How I should like to be home to-night, if only for an hour or two.

"Give my love and respects to *all*. I would write to them if I wasn't so lazy. (You see I call things by their right names once in a while.)

"So good-bye my *dear* sister. I will write you a longer letter when I feel more like it.

"Your affectionate brother,

"H. GEORGE."

"P. S. Wouldn't that signature look nice at the bottom of a check for \$1,000—that is, if I had the money in the bank."

Four years before young George wrote this letter a young man of thirty-two named Ulysses S. Grant had for a short time slept in an attic room in this same hotel, the "What Cheer House." He had come down from Ft. Vancouver, Columbia River, where, utterly disgusted with himself and the life he was leading, he had resigned from a captaincy in the United States Army, and was, when in San Francisco, trying to make his way eastward with a view to going into business or farming. Fame was to claim him in the rapidly approaching events.

The "What Cheer House" still stands and is doing business, though in a humble way. In the fifties it was the best house of its kind in the city. A temperance hotel, and a model of propriety and cleanliness, it was for the accommodation of men entirely. No women were ever received and not one was engaged on the premises. It was established by R. B. Woodward, a New Englander, who from its proceeds founded Woodward's Gardens, famous all over the Pacific Coast for more than two decades as a beautiful pleasure resort, containing a menagerie, a museum, a theatre, an art gallery, an aquarium and a variety of other attractions. One of the distinguishing features of this house was a little library, numbering several hundred volumes, well selected, and among them some economic works. Hon. James V. Coffey, who twelve or fourteen years later became an intimate friend of Henry George's, questioning him as to where he had during his busy life found time and books to read, was told that his solid reading was begun in this little library, while staying at the "What Cheer House" and at intervals following:

“Mr. George told me that he spent much of his time when out of work in that little room and that he had read most of the books. That, he said, was the first place he saw Adam Smith’s ‘Wealth of Nations,’ though I cannot remember that he said he read it then. Indeed, in his last writings, he has said that he did not read a line of Adam Smith until long after this period.”

This new state of things gave Richard George, the father, undisguised satisfaction. He wrote (January 19, 1859):

“I rejoice to find that you are doing so well. You now see the propriety of a young man just starting in life having some trade to fall back on in time of need, and you will say, ‘Pop was right, not only in this, but in many other things in which I dissented.’

“However, so far God has ordered all things well, and my earnest and sincere prayer is that he may still watch over you until he brings *all* at last to his eternal Kingdom. . . .

“My dear boy, let me say again to you: Be careful and nurse your means; lay up all you can and *owe no man anything* and you will be safe. Do not let others entice you. Act on your own judgment, and I hope and trust before I am called hence, to see you return prosperous and happy, which may God grant.”

His mother took up another matter (February 2):

“I am very glad you have left Victoria and have some of the comforts of life, and sorry to hear that Ellen is going there. I should not think that Jim would want her until he could make things more comfortable, and the people were more civilised—better society, a few of her own sex, at least. But this, you say, is what they want—women. Ellen will be a star of the first magnitude. Then I hope she will persuade others to go with her—some that have husbands there. Then

there will soon be a better state of things. A writer of great celebrity has said: 'All men that avoid female society have dull perceptions and are stupid, or have gross tastes and revolt against what is pure.' One of the great benefits a man may derive from women's society is that he is bound to be respectful to them. The habit is of great good to your moral man. There is somebody to whom he is bound to be constantly attentive and respectful. Moreover, this elevates and refines him.

"What will you do without Ellen and the children? . . . Have you made no other acquaintances? Is there no other place you visit?"

Jo Jeffreys had a word of advice (February 3):

"After having talked with Ned Wallazz and Billy Jones for some three hours, I turn with great pleasure to the consideration of you, my very respectable and respected friend.

"It was not my purpose to induce you to follow the legal profession, though I think you in every way capable to discharge its responsibilities with honour. I meant by what I said in a former letter to induce you to adopt *some one particular employment* to the exclusion of *every other*. *If you mine*, do so until you have succeeded in your object. If you enter a house as clerk, stay at it in God's name. If you should unfortunately resolve to follow printing, follow it with all your abilities and energy until there shall no longer be any necessity for it. You will allow me to say that your great fault (and I think it is your worst one) is that of half-doing things, *in this sense*, that you vacillate about the execution of that which alone secures permanent success and lasting fame. Few men are competent in *one* lifetime to win honour by more than *one* employment, and these few you would perhaps find were—unlike you—favoured by circumstances.

"Now you are competent for any labour to which your inclinations may direct you. You are not compe-

tent to succeed at a dozen employments, nor can you hope to amass a fortune by labouring at them alternately. If you live on as you are doing now, why, *you will live on*; you will earn sufficient to maintain you in comfort, *but that is all*. You can hardly hope by minding one month, by printing the next, and by serving in a clerkship a third, ever to arrive at a competence.

"Why you do this is evident. You are dissatisfied, either because you are not advancing or for trivial reasons, and then you undertake something different. Now you cannot expect to avoid unpleasant things, and you cannot expect to jump on a fortune, like a waif thrown away by a thief in his flight. Success is the reward of long exertion, not the triumph of a momentary energy. It is the crown for which, like Cromwell, you must struggle long and well. It is like happiness hereafter, only to be obtained by patient and continued servitude. . . .

"I wish I could make you feel as I do. You wouldn't then complain in after life (as you *will* do without you adopt my opinions) of the caprice and the wanton vacillation of Fortune's Goddess. . . .

"I recognise the difficulties of your position and how you are situated, and am aware that you are not at liberty to strike out into anything, as you were here. But do the best you can. Take my advice wherever it's possible to do it; I mean that which respects your employment and notwithstanding other embarrassing difficulties."

But notwithstanding Jo Jeffreys' counsel, a change quickly came, for business becoming slack at Eastman's and the other printing houses, George was unable to follow his trade. But refusing to remain idle, he obtained a position of weigher in the rice mill of Waite & Battles, on Fremont Street, near Mission. He wrote home (February 16, 1859):

"I am still in the rice mill and like it very well. I

shall stay, of course, until I am sure I can make a change for the better. I have to get up pretty early though, and consequently retire early. Indeed, you would be pleased to see what regular hours I keep. For months past 10 o'clock has invariably seen me in bed, for I have no friends here, and neither the disposition nor the money to go to the theatre or other places of amusement.

"Everything is still very dull, but the late rains, by increasing the gold yield, will tend to make times better."

Soon after this George Wilbur came down from Victoria and Henry George and he went to room together. First they lived in Natoma Street, then one of the quiet residence portions of the city. Afterwards they roomed on Pine Street, Henry George taking his meals at the "What Cheer House." Mr. Wilbur says of his companion at this period:

"Very soon after our acquaintance I discovered that he was studious and eager to acquire knowledge, and when we came to room together I frequently woke up at night to find him reading or writing. If I said: 'Good heavens, Harry, what's the matter? Are you sick?' he'd tell me to go to sleep or invite me to get dressed and go out for a walk with him. A spin around for a few blocks would do and then we'd get to bed again. I never saw such a restless human being."

That Henry George was in other ways restless was clear enough. His active, energetic nature would doubtless have made him restless anywhere, but in California the conditions were peculiarly conducive to it, for it was a country where thousands of active, independent young men like himself were opening up the richest mineral region in the world; a country which, within twenty years

from the first gold discovery in 1848, was to yield \$800,000,000 of the precious metal.¹ "California," he wrote to his Sister Caroline in January, "is sadly in want of missionaries and I think it would be a good notion for the Sunday school to send a few out, provided they be gold-fever proof." As shown by his Frazer River adventure, Henry George himself was not "gold-fever proof"; and now he kept thinking of the stories of fortune that were coming in from the California mines, and he talked with a young Philadelphian, Freeman A. Camp, who came to see him at the "What Cheer House," as to the chances they would have there. His mother, doubtless perceiving what was floating through his mind, wrote (March 3):

"Are you getting lazy? You do not write as long letters as you used to, nor tell us much when you do write. You change your business so often I should think you would have a great deal to tell. Remember, everything that concerns you will interest us. . . . I suppose the old proverb does not apply in California: 'A rolling stone,' etc. Be that as it may, we will rejoice when you are settled."

Two weeks later (March 17) his mother again wrote:

"I am sorry Ellie has left you, though it is all right; she certainly should be with her husband. I hope you have found some acquaintances among her friends, where you can go and spend a social evening. I don't believe in living without society, and least of all female society. And here I know you will have to be careful, for if the women are not of the right stamp, instead of elevating and refining you, they may prove your ruin. I like your early hours, but not your lonely ones. You should have a few good friends. Here, as in all other anxieties concerning you, I can only breathe the prayer: 'My Father, be thou the guide of his youth.'"

¹ Hittell's "History of California," Vol. III. p. 160.

But even if her son had the disposition to keep steadily at work, the rice mill gave indications of temporarily closing down. In April he wrote to his Sister Caroline:

"We have not been very busy at the mill lately, except for a day or two at a time; but this does not make much difference to me, as I have to stay there whether busy or not. I generally get up about 6 A.M., go to the hotel and take breakfast, and from there to the mill. I come up again at about half past six in the evening, eat supper, go into the library and read until about 9 P.M., when I come up to the room and write or think for an hour or two and then turn in. A pretty quiet way of living; but there is no telling what will turn up next."

And what did "turn up next" was anything but quiet, for the rice mill closing down, he was thrown out of work, and he started off into the interior of the State for the mines.

The day had passed when more than the occasional man could find some overlooked and unappropriated spot on river bed or bar, where, with no more equipment than shovel, pick and pan, he could draw forth any considerable amount of the precious metal. Though the gold-bearing region of California, including the northern mines and the southern mines, extended from Mt. Shasta to Mt. Whitney and embraced an area approximately as great as England's territory, every river bank, bar or bed giving the slightest indication of gold had been worked over and over. The nature of mining then became different. From "wet diggings" in the river channels, operations had turned to "dry diggings" in arid ravines, hill slopes and elevated flats; which led to "coyote-hole" mining (burrowing into the side of hills or boring wells); to "hydraulic mining" (the concentration of a powerful column of

water against a hill or mountain side so as to wash the gravel or "pay dirt" down through the sluice box or strainer); and lastly to "quartz mining," with its shafts and tunnels, stamp mills and heavy machinery. Gold mining, therefore, had changed its aspect, so that the average, common man could no longer expect to find, except occasionally, places unappropriated, where, with no special knowledge, or special appliances or other capital, he could find any considerable amount of the precious metal or where he could "dig" and "wash out" even ordinary "wages."

What drew most gold seekers, and what drew Henry George, into the mining regions was not so much the hope of mining in itself as of "prospecting" or "locating a claim"—finding on the unworked and unappropriated lands places that would yield to the newer processes the precious metal in quantities sufficient to pay for the working. Such a claim might be sold to or worked on shares by others who had the skill and capital, so that as soon as the rumour of a rich discovery had spread, multitudes of "prospectors" came rushing to the locality, eager to "stake off claims." The prospector was, therefore, essentially one who roamed from place to place at the beck of the Golden Goddess; and since she was whimsical and beckoned hither and thither, the prospector was always on the move.

There are no clear evidences as to what locality Henry George had set his hopes on, though the probabilities are that hearing in San Francisco confusing reports from a hundred different points, he concluded to strike off for some nearer and more advantageous centre, there to determine to which particular mining spot to go; and it seems likely that his first objective point was Placerville, formerly known as "Hangtown," and before that as "Dry

Diggings." For Placerville had not only developed rich finds in its immediate vicinity, but in some instances large treasure was found by digging into the very ground on which its cabins and houses stood. Moreover, it was on the old emigrant route from the East and the road from the Carson River to the Sacramento valley; and with its stores, hotels and saloons, was a place of recreation and supply for all that region of the Sierras.

To purpose to go to the mines was one thing; to get there was another, but young George was determined. "Having no other way of reaching them," he said subsequently,¹ "I started out to walk. I was, in fact, what would now be called a tramp. I had a little money, but I slept in barns to save it and had a rough time generally." But soon he had to spend his money, and then though slight in build and never what would be called muscular, he was forced to do farm work and other manual labour to keep himself alive. He had got some distance towards the mines, but for sheer want of living necessities, could go no farther; and with great toil, and some real suffering, he worked his way back to San Francisco.

This covered a period of nearly two months—for physical labour the hardest two months in all his life—during which time he seems not to have written a single letter home. While he was in the mountains, the Currys had written of an opportunity to set type on the "Statesman," in Portland, with pay according to competency; but when he had got back to San Francisco the time to accept had passed. Then it was that he learned of the death at Victoria of his sincere friend, Ellen George, and this news, taken with the experience just closed and a poor out-look for work in San Francisco, depressed his spirits, though

¹ Meeker notes, October, 1897.

he tried to write cheerfully home to his Aunt Mary (June 17):

“Jim George has gone up to Victoria again, but will be down as soon as he can settle up his business, which will probably be in two or three weeks. The children are here going to school; they are in the best health and spirits.

“We are enjoying splendid weather, just warm enough, though for the last few days it has been quite hot, reminding one of the summers at home. For some time past we have had plenty of green peas, strawberries and all the early summer vegetables and fruits. In ten or fifteen years this will be one of the greatest fruit countries in the world, for fruit trees are yearly being set out by the thousand and grape vines by the million.

“I am doing nothing just now, but expect to go to work next week. I have given up all idea of going to the mines.

“Frazer River seems to have given out at last, and every steamer that comes down is filled with miners. The rich deposits of a month or two ago appear to have been without foundation.

“I must bring my letter to a sudden close, for the clock has struck eleven, and I will just have time to get down to the post office to mail this. I intended to write a longer letter, but coming up here I stopped to look at the operation of moving a house, which must have consumed more time than I was aware of. The way they raise, lower, and pull big houses around the city here is astonishing.”

He had, indeed, given up all hope of going to the mines and also pretty much all hope of remaining ashore, where there seemed to be no work for him and no future. Thoughts of the sea came back in a flood tide. They ranged along the line of ocean heroes, and he asked himself why he should not follow that calling and rise to

fame? He was thinking earnestly of this, and stood at the parting of the ways, when his career was decided as if by accident. For the second time David Bond, through a chance meeting, offered a kindly service and obtained for his young friend a position as compositor—this time on the weekly "Home Journal" owned by Joseph C. Duncan. Thought of a career at sea never returned.

Printer's wages in California were at that time still high, the union rate for piece work being seventy-five cents a thousand ems and for time work to the average man, thirty dollars a week. But as George was still a minor, he got only a boy's pay for work in the regular hours—twelve dollars a week. He resolved now to keep, if he possibly could, to type-setting until he should come of age and be qualified as a journeyman. When somewhat settled he wrote to his Sister Jennie (August 2):

"You ask me about my studies. I am afraid I do not study much. I have not time and opportunity (or nearer the truth, perhaps, will enough) to push through a regular course. But I try to pick up everything I can, both by reading and observation, and flatter myself that I learn at least something every day. My principal object now is to learn my trade well, and I am pitching in with all my strength. So anxious am I now to get ahead and make up for lost time that I never feel happier than when at work, and that, so far from being irksome, is a pleasure. My heart just now is really in my work. In another year I'll be twenty-one and I must be up and doing. I have a pretty good prospect ahead and think that before many months I shall get into something better where I can make good wages. . . .

"My time is now pretty well taken up. As soon as I rise in the morning I go to breakfast and then immediately to work, which I seldom leave until nearly seven o'clock and once in a while not until one or two in the

morning. There are only three others in the office—nice social fellows—which makes it pleasant for me. I do not make much, but I am learning a good deal and think I have a pretty good prospect, so that I am quite satisfied.”

This contentment of mind was broken by news of the death of the dearest friend of his boyhood, Jo Jeffreys. Mrs. George revealed her sympathetic heart (August 18) :

“I feel as though I must say something to you, but my heart is full of the one theme, poor Jeffreys, poor Jo. O I cannot tell you of the anguish I feel when I think of him, and I can think of nothing else. . . . The agonising thought with me is the uncertainty of his state. O had he time to call upon his Saviour; to say: ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ . . .

“O his youth, his bright mind, his sensitiveness, his love for you made me feel an interest in him of no common kind. I do mourn for him sincerely. I know your heart too well to doubt your grief.

“Pop thought you would like to have a lock of his hair.”

By the same mail Will Jones wrote :

“Poor Jeffreys has paid the debt of nature, unanticipated and mourned by all. Brilliant in life, flashing upon our vision as a meteor, and as a meteor so soon to be lost in the impenetrable gloom of night. . . .

“We buried him at the Odd Fellows’ Cemetery, in our lot there, the last tribute of regard I could offer. None of his family was there save his two brothers, who came on from New York to the funeral.”

Jo Jeffreys’ death was a bitter and heavy loss. It snapped the tie of boyhood. Henry George’s life from that time forward was the life of the man. In November (20) he wrote to his mother :

"For the past week we have had beautiful weather, and I have employed every possible opportunity to sun myself. The shortness of the days makes this almost impracticable, except on Sundays, when I generally take a long walk outside of the city.

"There is nothing of any interest going on here now. Even the news of the 'bloody Harper's Ferry rebellion,' couldn't get up the smallest kind of an excitement, except among the political papers. General Scott has returned from San Juan, and therefore, all danger from that quarter has ceased for the present. Even the interior towns have for the time stopped burning down; so that, excepting the non-arrival of the mail steamer, we are left without even a decent topic of conversation.

"Letters from the Currys are getting more and more like angel's visits.

"I am still pursuing the even tenor of my way—working, walking, reading and sleeping.

"Thursday is Thanksgiving day for us Californians, as I suppose it is with you at home. I shall try and observe the day with the usual ceremonies, and will think of home even more than usual. I hope you will have a pleasant time, and oh! how I wish I could share it with you."

He wrote in this slighting manner of public matters in California doubtless to calm his mother's mind should she hear rumours from the West; for as a matter of fact most sensational events growing out of the slavery struggle there were crowding into this period. Only the year before the Supreme Court of the State had delivered a decision in the case of a negro named Archy which was described as "giving the law to the North and the nigger to the South." And now, on the just past 7th of September (1859), after the most bitter and tumultuous political campaign ever held in California, the Lecompton, or pro-slavery, party swept the State. Bad blood raised during the canvass left many scores to be settled after election,

the most conspicuous resulting in a duel between David S. Terry, Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, a pronounced pro-slavery supporter, and U. S. Senator David C. Broderick, the foremost anti-slavery man west of the Rocky mountains. Eighty persons were present to witness Broderick get a death-wound and Terry go unscathed. Broderick was carried to San Francisco and half-hourly bulletins were posted before a surging and excited multitude. He was accorded a public funeral and his name became a rally-word in the anti-slavery cause on the Pacific Coast.¹

Henry George was not unconscious of such events; on the contrary he took a burning and apprehensive interest in them. His father's mind, also, was filled with apprehension arising from similar events in the East, for he wrote (December 3):

"We have had a high old time with the Harper Ferry 'rebellion,' (as it is called) and John Brown. The abolitionists are making all the capital they can out of this poor fanatic. He is magnified and glorified beyond anything human, and dies a martyr, according to their belief. It is having a great effect upon business, and has thrown trade into something of a panic. Our iron men suffer, I am told, on account of the Southern merchants everywhere refusing to have anything to do with Northern men. What the result will be none can tell. I have always been of the opinion that this Union could never be dissolved, but if the present feeling is kept up and we do not get another Andrew Jackson for our next President, I fear I shall be mistaken in my opinion.

"Brown was hanged yesterday at 15 minutes past 11 without any disturbance. But the end is not yet."

¹ "Broderick and Gwin," by James O'Meara, pp. 225-254. Terry was shot and killed by a Deputy U. S. Marshal in 1889, when committing an assault upon U. S. Supreme Court Justice Field, growing out of a case in which Terry had been committed to jail by Judge Field for contempt of court.