

## THE SAILOR AND HIS VOYAGES

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THERE WAS excitement among Henry George's relatives and friends, for it was no small hazard in 1855 to circle the globe. To the George family it was the first break in their tight little circle. Now, at the age of fifteen, Henry was putting childhood abruptly behind him.

Small for his age, with disproportionately small hands and feet and a complexion delicate as a girl's he looked ill-equipped for the rough life of the sea as he stood at the corner, his red hair gleaming in the sunlight, waving his cap in a last good-by. Gripping tighter the gifts he carried, a new Bible presented by St. Paul's Sunday School<sup>1</sup> and James' *Anxious Enquirer*,<sup>2</sup> a present from Cousin George Latimer, he turned quickly and joined his chattering escort. His father was there, and so were Uncles Thomas Latimer and Joseph Van Dusen<sup>3</sup> and a group of young friends who carried his sea kit. All of them went with him as far as Market Street wharf<sup>4</sup> where they delivered him to Captain Miller. The youthful sea captain and the boy boarded a steamboat and crossed the Delaware River to New Jersey, where they took a train for New York.

It was the first great adventure for the lad who had never been more than a stone's throw from home. A few days later he wrote from New York, "I signed the shipping articles at \$6 a month [*sic*] and two months' advance, which I got this morning. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

During his eight days waiting in New York harbor he had a chance to see something of a city greater even than Philadelphia in size. He was much impressed by New York's "business and bustle," and he wrote his family, "The upper part is a beautiful place—the streets wide and clear and regular and the houses all of brown stone and standing ten or twenty feet from the pavement, with gardens in front."<sup>6</sup>

The *Hindoo* was delayed in getting to sea because of the scarcity of sailors. Some who applied were so inefficient that Henry had to be sent aloft to do the slushing down of the masts. On April 7, the ship was towed downstream by a steamboat. Off the Battery she dropped anchor. Henry wrote home to Philadelphia:

The view from this spot is beautiful—the North river and New York bay covered with sailing vessels and steamers of every class and size, while back, the hills, are covered with country seats. I saw at one time four of the largest class ocean steamers going down the bay at once, while ships, barques, brigs and schooners are all the time going in and out. . . . I ate my first meal sailor style today and did not dislike it at all. Working around in the open gives one such an appetite that he can eat almost anything.<sup>7</sup>

Three days later the *Hindoo*, a 586-ton, full-rigged ship—large for her day—laden with lumber and carrying a crew of twenty, set sail for Australia.

It had been agreed between Mr. George and Captain Miller that Henry was to be treated like any other seaman. The boy soon learned how others lived and he appreciated the comfortable home he had left. To the end of his life he was to remember “how sweet hard-tack, munched in the middle watch while the sails slept in the tradewind had tasted; what a dish for a prince was seapie on the rare occasions when a pig had been killed or a porpoise harpooned; and how good was the plum-duff that came to the fore-castle only on Sundays and great holidays.”<sup>8</sup>

Once he said to a sailor, “I wish I were home to get a piece of pie.” His companion, a Yorkshireman, asked quietly, “Are you sure you would find a piece of pie there?” His expression and the note of reproof in his voice so shamed the boy that long years later he wrote of the incident: “‘Home’ was associated in my mind with pie of some sort—apple or peach or sweet potato or cranberry or mince—to be had for the taking, and I did not for the moment realize that in many homes pie was as rare a luxury as plums in our sea-duff.”<sup>9</sup>

The trip also introduced him to the tyrannical powers that the navigation laws conferred on a master of a ship. For although Sam Miller was a good man, he, like every other captain, had command of and absolute control over the poorly fed, ill-paid men sailing under him. For he was at once employer and

judge.<sup>10</sup> This experience made Henry George a lifelong advocate of sailors' rights.

It was August 24, 1855, when the crew of the *Hindoo* first sighted Australia. They were 137 days out of New York. The ship hove to in Hobson's Bay, near Melbourne, and spent a month unloading and reloading cargo, taking in ballast and changing crew members. From Melbourne it sailed to India and up the Hooghly branch of the Ganges to Calcutta in less than ten weeks, arriving there on December 4. Henry George had seen a little of Australia during a period when times were hard and thousands were out of work. Now he had a chance to see a little of India—its extremes of riches and poverty,<sup>11</sup> its beauty and squalor, its negligence of its people. "The very carrion birds," he remembered years later, "are more sacred than human life."

It was not until December 10, eight months after he had sailed from New York, that he received the first letters from home.<sup>12</sup> His sister Jennie wrote from Philadelphia, "Hearing that a ship was going to sail in a few days we thought we would write the first opportunity. The flowers are coming up beautifully. Your rose bush has got any quantity of buds and they are quite large."<sup>13</sup> One of his young friends known as "Dicky Doubter" addressed him as "Dear Mackerel" and wrote him gossip of their cronies (nicknamed "Soda Ash" and "Sea Dog," respectively), and closed his letter a trifle lugubriously with, "I hope God will protect you through all the dangers of the sea. Good-bye. It may not be in this world that we meet but I hope it will be above."<sup>14</sup>

Henry's parents evidently took the separation cheerfully though not without some qualms. The elder George wrote:

The parting with you was much harder for your mother and myself than I at first supposed it would be. . . . You have our prayers, morning and evening, for your safety, health and prosperous voyage, which may God in His goodness vouchsafe to hear and answer, returning you in health and safety to your home. . . . Your little brig<sup>15</sup> is safely moored on the mantelpiece. First thing when we wake, our eyes rest on her, and she reminds us of our dear sailor boy. When you get home no doubt she will look as rusty as your own ship, and will want a thorough overhauling.<sup>16</sup>

The voyager's letters home were written with care but the spelling was abominable. And they were little more than sea

logs. This must have disappointed the family back home in Philadelphia, waiting anxiously for personal news.

We crossed the line November 5 when 42 days out. Here we were fortunate as not to experience much of that wet calm and squally weather so peculiar to the line. From this place until we arrived at about 10° North we had the same fair airs as on the other side of the line, with every prospect of a short passage. Then the wind became stronger and more variable, but dead ahead. She [the *Hindoo*] would often head on one tack E.S.E. and on tacking ship, instead of heading N.N.W. as she ought to do, she would not lay higher than W. Progress under the circumstances was impossible, and for over a week we did not gain a single inch to the northward.<sup>17</sup>

But the boy, now sixteen years old, penciled some notes—badly punctuated and poorly spelled—on the back pages of his sea journal recording his impressions of Calcutta and the Ganges. They foreshadowed a literary style which was to come into flower later:

The river, at times very broad and again contracting its stream into a channel hardly large enough for a ship of average size to turn in, was bordered by small native villages, surrounded by large fruit trees, through which the little bamboo huts peeped. As we advanced the mists which had hitherto hung over the river cleared away, affording a more extensive prospect. The water was covered with boats of all sizes, very queer to the eye of an American. They were most of them bound to Calcutta with the produce and rude manufacture of the country—bricks, tiles, earthen pots, etc. They were pulled by from four to ten men, and steered by an old fellow wrapped up in a sort of cloth, seated on a high platform at the stern. Some had sails to help them along, in which there were more holes than threads. On the banks the natives began to go to their daily toil, some driving cattle along, others loading boats with grain, while the women seemed busy with their domestic tasks. As we approached the city, the banks on both sides were lined with handsome country residences of wealthy English. At about 10 A.M. we came to Garden Reach. The river which here takes a sudden bend, was crowded with ships of all nations, and above nothing could be seen but a forest of masts.<sup>18</sup>

On January 15, the *Hindoo* started down the Hooghly with a cargo of some twelve hundred tons of rice, seeds, etc., and with a new crew. Henry George was provoked by the fact that

it took "over two weeks getting down a river eighty miles long."<sup>19</sup>

The cook became ill and died on the trip home. Henry had to do a turn in the galley for about a week. He hated it. The days seemed long and monotonous. However, a pet monkey he had bought in Calcutta did much to relieve the boredom of the voyage. The animal was also of great service in keeping roaches off his face as he slept and off his food as he ate.<sup>20</sup>

On June 14, 1856, after an absence of one year and sixty-five days, the *Hindoo* again anchored in New York harbor. With fourteen months' pay (about fifty dollars) in his pocket, Henry George took a train to Philadelphia.

The boy who returned home was very different from the boy who had sailed away to see the world. He was broader of shoulder and more self-reliant. Though he was only seventeen years old he seemed much older. His white skin, burned by wind and sun, made his eyes seem bluer. His red hair had grown darker. On his shoulder, sailor-fashion, perched his little pet monkey. The creature seemed to resent the affectionate greeting given her master. Her intense jealousy was focused principally on his small brother Morris, and to Henry's regret the monkey had to be given to a friend who had no young children.

The homecoming had its rich rewards. Henry could regale his family and his former playmates with tales of foreign places, with descriptions of storms at sea and of strange and different peoples, and with his knowledge of every kind of boat afloat—barks and brigs and barkentines and brigantines and ships and schooners and sloops. He knew every part of the rigging on each of them. The children delighted in giving him a piece of string and watching his small, skilled, but now calloused, hands tie difficult sailor's knots. He could box the compass with a speed that made his words nearly indistinguishable. And above all else the children loved to hear him sing chanties, learned at sea, in his high, off-pitch voice.

To the children's regret, however, Henry's older friends and acquaintances demanded much of his time—Jo Jeffreys in particular.

The boys made their headquarters in Henry's little room with the narrow bed in the corner, the small case of books on the bureau, and the sea chest on the floor against the wall.<sup>21</sup> In the dim gas light that could be coaxed into brightness only on

occasion, they would sit and smoke and discuss all things in heaven and earth.

But these were the leisure hours. Mr. George had found Henry a place in a printing house in an effort to keep him ashore. There the boy first learned to set type. Working at the case helped to broaden his education. He learned to spell correctly and he absorbed much general information from the material he set in type and from association and discussion with others in the print shop. He made it a practice to appeal to the men around him for accurate information about historical and political dates and facts.<sup>22</sup>

One day, while setting type as an apprentice, the first puzzling question of political economy came to the boy. An old printer pointed out that wages were low in the old countries and higher in the new ones. It seems strangely contradictory that where population and progress were centered and where industrialization was heaviest, wages should be lower than in new, sparsely settled places.<sup>23</sup> He gave long thought to this anomaly.

But the topical affairs of the nation also absorbed Henry George's interest. He became an ardent abolitionist and frequently argued the matter with his parents. His father, being a loyal Democrat, supported Buchanan. His mother reminded him that the Scriptures seemed to sanction slavery. She was convinced that the tales of cruelty to slaves were exaggerated and that the majority of slaveowners were the same sort of "humanely disposed people" as herself.

However, the boy was already beginning to understand some of the connotations of the word "property." He contended hotly against what the owners "could do" since "if slaves were property, their masters, having the right to do what they please with their own property, could ill-treat and even kill them if so disposed."<sup>24</sup>

With his friends, he formed "The Lawrence Literary Society," which met in a small building that had once been a church. The object of the association was "educational"; it focused on the writing of essays. The name of "Hen" George appeared on two of these essays, one on Mormonism, toward which he took a belligerent attitude, and the other on "The Poetry of Life."<sup>25</sup> But the literary ambitions of the club soon waned in favor of social activities. The boys developed a fondness for telling lurid ghost stories, for boxing and fencing, and for singing

raucous songs. They smoked "long black segars" and indulged in a drink labeled "Red Eye."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps this was a reaction to the austere home life which most of the boys experienced. For card-playing was forbidden and Sunday in Philadelphia was a day of such puritanical observance that even riding in a public conveyance was considered desecration of the Sabbath.

In the meantime Henry had become so proficient at the case that he could set an average of 5,000 ems a day, including distributing and correcting. For this, however, he was earning only two dollars a week. Even that meager wage ceased when, remembering his grandfather's injunction, "Do nothing that you are ashamed of and let no living man impose on you," he refused to submit to a domineering foreman and quit his job.

There was little other work in Philadelphia at the time. During a lull in his search for permanent employment, Henry George embarked on a topsail schooner carrying coal to Boston. He applied as a seaman, but the Captain, noting his youth (he was barely eighteen) wanted to turn him down.

"I had told him," George related long afterward, "that I could handle the sails and steer. He seemed to doubt it and said: 'You can't steer this schooner.' But I did steer her. The sea was very rough and the schooner rolled and pitched, the waves often dashing over the wheel."<sup>27</sup> By the end of the voyage he had made himself so useful that he was paid off at the full rate of an able seaman. "It was the highest compliment ever paid me," he boasted later.

When he returned to Philadelphia the outlook for work seemed darker still. Henry had been corresponding with friends who had gone to Oregon, and soon he developed a longing to go West where he believed he could earn a living. A cousin, Uncle Dunkin George's son Jim, was in California. The Philadelphia boy wrote to a friend in September, 1857:

There are thousands of hard-working mechanics now out of employment in this city. If you hear of any business men or rich corporations in your part of the country who are in want of a nice young man of my well known talents and capabilities, recommend me without loss of time as I am pretty damn 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 Lighthouse

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.<sup>28</sup>

Although he may not have sensed all its implications at the time, Henry George had become a victim of the Panic of 1857. There had been a business recession in 1855, then a flurry of prosperity, and then: "In August (1857) the storm broke in all its fury. Banks and corporations crashed; railroads became bankrupt; land values dropped sharply; building operations came to a sudden end."<sup>29</sup>

There was widespread unemployment in the cities, including Philadelphia. The panic lasted until the summer of 1858.<sup>30</sup> In spite of good crops, city workers were faced with starvation through the latter part of the preceding year. The jobless in cities from Chicago to the East held protest meetings and even threatened violence. Mobs threatened to raid banks, calling them "plundering shops," and in New York a procession marched on Wall Street.<sup>31</sup>

Doubtless this feeling of insecurity affected young George, for like other youths he turned toward the promise of the West. As will be seen, hard times followed him there. But in the meantime he was only too glad to leave the East and try for a place on a ship sailing for California.

The *Shubrick* was only 140 feet in length and 371 tons burden. She was a side-wheeler and had two masts, the foremast square rigged. She looked as trim as a pleasure yacht but she was armed with six cannon and also "a novel contrivance for squirting scalding water," since her duty was not only to supply lighthouses and maintain buoyage but also to protect government property against Indian tribes along the Pacific coast.<sup>32</sup>

After writing a letter to the congressman from his district seeking support, Henry George was accepted, greatly to his delight, for the *Shubrick's* crew as steward or storekeeper at forty dollars a month. He planned, when he should reach California, to work his way to Oregon where friends had promised him help in getting a job.

On December 22, 1857, a year and a half after his return on the *Hindoo*, Henry received his order to sail. He hurriedly said good-by to his family, and, embarking on the little craft at the Navy Yard, steamed down the Delaware toward the long passage around the Horn to the Golden Gate.



Christmas Day, spent at sea, was one he would never forget. At home the family was deep in holiday festivities. At sea, the day started sunny and calm. But suddenly, without warning, a squall blew up and steadily mounted to the fury of a hurricane. Seas broke over the little ship, stove in part of the superstructure, ripped off the port shutters, and washed overboard everything movable on deck, including harness casks, deck engines, and spare spars and lumber. There was nothing to do but lighten the vessel. Henry and a Negro deck hand heaved overboard bags of coal while "the sailing master hung on the bridge shouting to us through the speaking trumpet and barely able to make himself heard as he told us that the work we were doing was for life or death."<sup>33</sup>

The lightening of the cargo saved the ship. By morning, when the storm had abated, she was able to proceed. The shipboard routine was resumed. A few items from a penciled list in the writing of the storekeeper give an idea of his responsibilities:

*Shubrick* voyage. Clothes served out. Dec. 27, 1857.

De Camp—Suit oil clothes, Sou'wester.

Simmons—Monkey jacket

Wilson—Sou'wester, Guernsey

George—Oil jacket, 1 pair Socks

John Lee—Jacket & Sou'wester, 2 Shirts, 2 Shirts

2 Pr. Drawers, ½ doz. Socks, 1 pr. Boots.

Sylvester—Monkey jacket, Oil suit & Sou'wester.<sup>34</sup>

Six days after the storm the vessel reached the West Indies and recoaled. On her journey down the coast of South America the *Shubrick* stopped for five days at Rio de Janeiro. Henry had a chance to wander along the rocks, catching crabs and toadfish, and to paddle about in a canoe made of one solid piece of wood, the counterpart of the one used by Robinson Crusoe. He visited the city once but saw little of it, "as it was too infernally hot to walk the narrow streets."<sup>35</sup>

Out of this voyage came an experience which Henry George set down eight years later in the *Philadelphia Saturday Night*, a prosperous weekly newspaper owned by his friend Edmund Wallazz. It was called "Dust to Dust," and in its way it is one of the strangest of all the strange stories which have come from the sea.

Yellow fever had broken out aboard the *Shubrick* soon after the ship had left Rio. Several of the crew were stricken and all

recovered save the popular second assistant engineer, S. W. Martin. The story continues:

The crisis seemed past, and if his strength would only last until he neared the Cape, all would be well. . . . Only one port remained to be passed before we should hail the rain and fog, and strength-giving winds—Monte Video. But when we entered that great stream, more sea than river, the mighty La Plata, on which the city is situated, Martin was dying. . . .

For some time in intervals of consciousness, Martin had been aware of his approaching end, and the only thing that seemed to trouble him was the idea of dying so far from those he loved, and of being buried where affection might never mark his resting place. It was his last and earnest request that his grave might be made on shore, where his body could be recognized by his friends, and not committed to the waves; and though it was very doubtful if the privilege could be granted, yet the captain resolved to take the corpse into the harbor, and try to obtain permission to bury it ashore.

And when night came, sadly we talked in little groups upon the deck, while the sound of hammer and plane from the gangway, told that the "last house" of one of us was being built. Though no star shed its light, still it was not all blackness. The "river of silver" beamed with a luster of its own. Not alone the furrows our prow threw aside, or the broad wake we left behind, but the whole surface of the water glowed with phosphorescent brightness, and we seemed to force our way through a sheet of molten silver.

All night long we steamed up the river, and when the sun again arose—it showed us the harbor of Monte Video. Out beyond all the other shipping lay a stately frigate, the Stars and Stripes of the great republic streaming from her peak in the morning breeze—the old *St. Lawrence*, flagship of the squadron. . . . We were bringing them news and letters from home, and every port of the great ship thronged with faces eager to see the comer from the land they loved. Running up under her quarter, we were hailed and answered, and after the usual inquiries, our captain mentioned the death of young Martin, and his wish to have him buried on shore; but was told that it was impossible, that we would infringe the quarantine rules by even entering the port with the corpse; and was directed to steam back some miles and commit the body to the waves, before entering the harbor.

The shrill whistle of the boatswain sounded; a boat dropped from

the frigate's davits, reached our side, took letters and papers, and our little steamer turned slowly round to retrace her path. We had felt sad while coming up, but a darker gloom hung over all while going down the river. It seemed so hard that the last and only request of the poor boy could not be complied with.

But swiftly down the current in the bright, fresh morning dashed our little boat, and when the lofty frigate was hull-down behind us, we turned and stopped for the last sad rites.

Upon the quarter deck, in reverential silence, all hands were gathered. The large box-like coffin, in which we had hoped to commit our dead to mother earth, bored full of holes and filled up with heavy materials, was placed by the side, covered with the flag. The beautiful burial service was commenced, its solemn sentences sounding doubly solemn under such mournful circumstances—there was a pause—then came the words, "We therefore commit his body to the deep!" and with a surge the waves closed above the dead.

Hardly a word was spoken as the wheels again took up their task, and we began to ascend the river, but every eye was fixed on the spot we were leaving, and at the same instant an exclamation sprang from every lip as the coffin was seen to rise! The engine was quickly stopped, a boat lowered, and taking a small anchor and a heavy chain, they tried to secure and sink the box. But it was no easy task in the fresh breeze and short, chopping sea, and the coffin seemed almost instinct with life and striving to elude their efforts. Again and again they were foiled in their attempt to fasten the weights, but were at last successful, and once more the water closed above the corpse.

After waiting some time, to make sure that it could not float again, we started once more up the river, and this time awe was mingled with our grief. Most men who follow the sea have a touch of superstition. There is something of the vastness with which nature presents herself upon the great waters which influences in this direction even minds otherwise sceptical. And as we steamed up the river, it was more than hinted among many of us that the strong desire of the dying man had something to do with the difficulty of sinking his body.

This time we passed the frigate, saluting, but not stopping, and entered the port. It was war time; on the Pampas some phase of the interminable quarrels of the Southern federation was being fought out, and the harbor was crowded with men-of-war. Nearly all of the Brazilian navy was there, watching the progress of events; and besides these, and the numerous merchantmen, the ensign of

almost every nation was displayed above some armed vessel. By direction of the officer who boarded us, we proceeded past them all, to the farther side of the harbor, where we were ordered to lie in quarantine seven days before being allowed to coal.

The new scene, the various objects of interest around and the duties of clearing up, conspired to make us forget the events of the morning, but the sun was yet some distance above the western horizon when a startling circumstance occurred to recall them to our minds.

Nearly all hands were busily engaged below, only two or three loitering around the deck, when the quartermaster, sweeping the harbor with his glass, noticed something floating in, which riveted his attention. Again and again he looked at it; then, with surprize and dismay in his face, called the officer of the deck. The whisper spread through the ship, and in a few minutes all were watching in silence the object that seemed drifting towards us. Onward it came, through all the vessels that lay beyond us—now lost to our view, now coming in sight again—turning and tacking as though piloted by life, and steadily holding its course for our steamer. It passed the last steamer, and came straight for us. It came closer, and every doubt was dispelled—it was, indeed, the coffin! A thrill of awe passed through every heart as the fact became assured.

Right under our bow came the box; it touched our side; halted a moment, as if claiming recognition, and then drifted slowly past us toward the shore.

There was an excited murmur forward, a whispered consultation in the knot of officers aft; then one advanced—"Man the quarter boat, boys; take pick and spades; tow the coffin ashore, and bury the body!"

It was the work of a moment—the boat shot like an arrow from our side, the ashen oars bending with the energy of the stroke. Reverently and gently they secured the box, and with slow, solemn strokes towed it to the foot of the desolate looking hill that skirts the bay. There, breaking it open, they bore the corpse, covered with the flag, a little distance up the hillside, and making in the twilight a grave among the chaparral, laid it to rest, marking the spot with a rude cross, which concealed from observation by the bushes, would yet serve as a mark of recognition, and secure the grave, should it be noticed, from the intrusion of vandal hands.

And so, in spite of all, that dying wish was gratified, and the body which the waters refused to receive was laid to rest in its mother earth.

Instead of going around the Horn, the course taken by sailing vessels, the sidewheeler went through the Straits of Magellan. But the weather was so severe that the coal supply ran out and the crew had to moor the *Shubrick* to a bank and cut wood ashore for fuel. The scenery in the western part of the Strait "was a most impressive sight," wrote Henry George years later. "We ran upon a schooner which belonged to English missionaries who were praying and working with the natives. We saw a number of Terre del Fuegians [*sic*], and they were not altogether attractive. I heard afterward that the Patagonians killed and ate those very missionaries who were trying to convert them."<sup>36</sup>

The *Shubrick* stopped at several ports along the west coast of South America, and then, 155 days after her departure from Philadelphia, on May 27, 1858, finally passed through the Golden Gate.