

BEGINNINGS IN CALIFORNIA

SAN FRANCISCO, situated on flower-carpeted hills that creep down to one of the most beautiful harbors in the world, was hardly a handsome city when Henry George reached it in 1858. But it was indisputably picturesque, with the greater part of the population of fifty thousand living either in tents or little clumsily built wooden houses, lined up along poorly paved or dirt streets. Some of the new buildings were substantial, and the old adobe ones, including the garden-surrounded Mission, were quaint and charming. Flowers grew everywhere on trees and vines and roadsides. The hills were abloom with color. The air was velvet soft and the blue sky was cloudless when the *Shubrick* steamed into San Francisco harbor.

Although the great gold rush had started nine years earlier, San Francisco retained the air of a boom town. The highways about the city teemed with men attracted by the lure of sudden fortune—or at least a comfortable living. Few women or children were to be seen on the busy streets. The hordes of husky, roughly clad men—prospectors, miners, lumberjacks, seamen, and cowboys—who far outnumbered the businessmen were, for the most part, surprisingly young-looking despite their bearded faces.

It was a very different world from the one Henry George had left in the placid East. He wrote a friend that it was “a dashing place, rather faster than Philadelphia.”¹

His plan had been to push on to Oregon, but the summons he had expected did not come. So, managing to get discharged from the *Shubrick* and freed of the shipping articles which he had been compelled to sign, he remained in San Francisco.*

* There is some confusion over the status of George's “discharge.” It may be that he “jumped ship.” His son relates in the *Life* that when the youth came

Making his temporary home with Cousin Jim George and Jim's wife Ellen, the boy had time to look around.

Letters from home arrived frequently. His father reassured him, "Don't think I regret the step you have taken. On the contrary, the more I think of it, the more I see the hand of Providence in it."² His mother wrote how the children missed him and added her counsel of hope and courage, "I want you to do something or be somebody in the world. I do not think you will disappoint me. Have less confidence in self and more in a higher power."³

Henry looked around San Francisco for work but the search was futile. When his little store of money was used up, he decided to join Jim George and an acquaintance, George Wilbur, in the gold rush along the Frazer River just across the Canadian border. At the first opportunity he worked his way as a seaman on a topsail schooner to Victoria. It was during this voyage that he had a conversation with some miners, also traveling to the gold fields, which left an indelible impression on him.

One of the older miners remarked that "wages will not always be as high as they are today in California. As the country grows, as people come in, wages will go down."⁴

This simple observation of a poor miner coincided with the statement made by the Philadelphia printer. Yet it puzzled the boy. Why, if the country develops, should the condition of those who had to work for a living become worse instead of better? This question, planted in the mind of a youth who was not yet nineteen, seemed to demand an answer.

When he reached Victoria, Henry George found that floods on the Frazer River had interrupted mining operations. He took a job in a miner's supply store which Jim George had opened. It must have been an austere life. Henry had written to his sister Caroline that "California is sadly in need of missionaries and I think it would be a good notion for the Sunday

ashore he sought the seclusion of Jim George's home and that Jim George's wife, Ellen, agreed to "confer with Commander De Camp (of the *Shubrick*), 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*." This was in May. His enlistment did not expire until Nov. 11, 1858. In a footnote Henry George, Jr., writes: "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."—Editor

School to send a few out, provided they were gold-fever proof. The great want of the country in my opinion, is women. Imagine, if you can, a place entirely destitute of them, and you can form some idea of the mining districts and even of some of the large towns." ⁵

His pay in the mining town of Victoria was irregular and poor. To save room rent he slept rolled up in a blanket on the counter of Jim George's store or on piled bags of flour on the floor. Living in the shop had its advantages; Henry was always on hand for after-hour customers. When he wanted to sleep he placed a sign on the outside door: "Please give this door a kick." ⁶

A falling out with Jim George caused him to leave his cousin's employ, and he went to live in a tent with young Wilbur. For some months the two friends scratched out an existence. Meager as were their rations, Henry, not always to Wilbur's liking, insisted on sharing them with half-starved Indians who visited the mining camp. One day, while Wilbur was off trying to find food, his partner invited three of them to the tent. The only edible thing he found to offer them was a bag of sugar. The Indians ate it, every grain. ⁷

But finding gold—or a job—proved impossible. Henry borrowed money from Wilbur and others to buy steerage passage back to San Francisco. He had no coat, so Wilbur lent him his own. Food on shipboard was notoriously scarce, so six friends clubbed together and bought Henry six pies from an old man who peddled them to dwellers in the mining camp. Fearing their bon voyage gift might be eaten by other hungry travelers, they hid the pies under the blanket on Henry's berth. When night fell he had forgotten about the present. He wearily flung himself into his bunk without undressing. Next morning he discovered the sad fate of the pies. ⁸

Back in San Francisco, jobs were still scarce. He was ready to turn back to the sea when he found a position in a printing house at sixteen dollars a week and was able to pay nine dollars a week for "a beautiful little room and first rate living" in one of the best hotels in San Francisco, the What Cheer House. It had a splendid little library where he spent many of his evenings. But there was little else to do for recreation. He wrote his sister Jennie, "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 respect it is much better; I spend less money. . . . I suppose you have all grown somewhat since I left. I have not changed much, except that I have grown even uglier and rougher looking. You thought I looked hard when I came from Calcutta, but you should have seen me in Victoria!"⁹

He had grown a beard, of course, as soon as he could entice one to grow—a small red affair it was—to make him look older than his nineteen years.

The printing house job did not last long in these times of uncertain business conditions. Unable to follow his trade, he obtained a position as weigher in a rice mill. Shortly after this, George Wilbur returned from Victoria and the two boys took a room together on Pine Street, eating their meals at the What Cheer House.

"It would please Ma," Henry wrote to Jennie, "if she knew how regular and quiet I am in my habits. However, I suppose it is as much from necessity as from choice, for if I had money I suppose I would be the same as most others."¹⁰

His routine was Spartan in its simplicity. He arose at six and had an early breakfast at the hotel before going to the mill. He returned in the evening at six-thirty for supper and, afterward, quiet reading in the What Cheer library until nine o'clock, his usual bedtime. But George Wilbur would often wake up in the middle of the night and find his roommate reading or writing.¹¹ "Good heavens, Harry, what's the matter?" he would ask. "Are you sick?" The reply would either be an order to go back to sleep or a request to get up and dress and go for a walk. A quick turn in the night air seemed to quiet the young student—for now he was reading seriously—and make him ready for sleep.

Wilbur's forbearance was tried by more than restlessness, however. On those mornings when he awakened to find that Henry had left unusually early for work, absent-mindedly wearing his roommate's much longer trousers and in their place leaving his own too short ones, Wilbur was, naturally, quite exasperated.¹²

Friends in the East were perturbed by Henry's frequent change of jobs. "You are not competent to succeed at a dozen employments," wrote Jo Jeffreys, "nor can you hope to amass a fortune by laboring at them alternately."¹³ But however much the boy tried to follow his friend's advice, he was forced to

change employment again. The rice mill shut down. This time Henry decided to try the mines in the interior of the state. He had no money for transportation so he started out to walk. To save his little cash he slept in barns and did chores to pay for his food. It was a rough experience. At length sheer want of living necessities forced him to turn back, although he had managed to go some distance toward the mines. Suffering real privations he worked his weary way back to San Francisco.

Henry had been gone two months. When he returned he found the long awaited offer of work in Oregon—only he was too late and the offer had expired. The opportunity he had missed proved a bitter disappointment. And hardest of all to bear was word of the death of his friend and counselor, Cousin Ellen George, who had helped to brighten his first days in California.