

FROM HAND TO MOUTH

UNBEKNOWNST TO Henry George, his beloved sister Jennie had fallen ill a continent away. She had been his confidante from boyhood into maturity. Once she wrote him in California, "What would I give if I could fly on the new telegraph to you and have a talk, if it were only for an hour. I wish we could send letters on it, don't you? Just to think a month's space between us. When you are reading this, what I say is a month old."¹

It was not until weeks after her short illness that Henry learned the shocking news of Jennie's death. As late as the summer of 1862, the United States mail was slow and almost indescribably inefficient. Travelers who went to California by the Salt Lake route bore tales of broken mail bags, seen at stations, where letters lay "scattered knee deep,"² and of mail bags that had been lying on the plains all winter. Thus a letter from Uncle Thomas George was weeks in reaching Henry, and the shock of Jennie's death was all the more profound for the time it had taken to relay the news.

The letter from Philadelphia reached Henry at *The Union* plant. He bore his sorrow alone until after his work was done. When he returned home in the early morning, Annie could see from his white, drawn face that something was deeply wrong. No longer able to contain himself, Henry broke into a flood of tears and handed her the letter from Thomas George and another from his mother. After a time he began pacing the floor, muttering over and over to himself, "There is another life! There is another life after this! I shall see my sister again!"³

Jennie's death seems to have opened the way for a deep and abiding conviction of a life beyond this one. That faith grew stronger with the passing of time. A message of condolence to his mother some years later, when her own sister died, bears

this out: "The older I grow and the more I think, the more fully I realized the wisdom and beneficence that pervades the universe and that is impressed on all its laws. . . . As we were born so we die. As there were others here to receive us, so must there be others there to meet us, and the Christian faith promises that the wise and good in all ages have believed that death is but a new birth. . . . Our little life, what is it, our little globe, what is it, to the infinity that lies beyond?"⁴

But now the youth of twenty-three had little time for philosophy. The days bore down upon him with heavy responsibilities.

A son, Henry, Jr., had arrived in the tiny George home. Out of sheer economic necessity the young father was compelled to turn his hand to things other than typesetting. Once he was hired to collect tickets at the door of the hall when a young newspaperman whose nom de plume was Mark Twain came to Sacramento to give a lecture. There is no record of a meeting between the two or of George's impressions of the rising American humorist.

Although he managed to pay his debts and send money home to Philadelphia, accumulating any savings proved impossible. Some slight investment in mining stocks, which were subject to frequent assessments, proved almost worthless. And then Henry lost his job at *The Union* because of a disagreement with the foreman, John Timmins.

There was nothing to do but return to San Francisco, which Henry George did at the end of January, 1864, after more than a year at the Sacramento newspaper. He spent five days attempting to sell clothes wringers but did not make a single sale. Finally obtaining a job as a substitute typesetter, he sent for his wife and baby son to come to San Francisco.

An opportunity suddenly opened in December when George and Isaac Trump were able to purchase part of the equipment of the *Evening Journal*, which had died after a starving existence. They opened a modest printing shop, but Henry's elation at owning a business of this sort was short lived. Alas for ambition, sudden drought brought on hard times in California. Cattle died in droves. Furthermore, the gold supply lessened and the losses of farmers, ranchers, and miners deepened into a general depression. Work became scarce. The partners in the little printing business were desperate. When they could, they took out of their receipts as much as twenty-five cents a day each,

which they spent for food. Mrs. Trump was living with her mother so Isaac took his dinner with the Georges.

At the time of her marriage, Annie Fox's sole accomplishment as a cook was the baking of rich, black English fruit cake. She always kept a supply of this delicacy so that when her husband came home from work between two and four o'clock in the morning he might appease his hunger before going to sleep. She also had served it for the collation when the George Wilburs⁵ and the A. A. Stickneys⁶ came for their frequent and hilarious card games. But now there was no money to buy the ingredients for even homemade cake. The little family subsisted on milk, corn meal, potatoes, bread, and the cheapest fish that could be bought. Usually the husband went to work without breakfast on the plea that he would get it downtown. His wife suspected, and she was right, that he went without it. And she was brave and self-sacrificing in her own way.

Although fragile and delicately reared, Annie George never complained of hardships. One by one she secretly pawned her few pieces of jewelry, saving only her wedding ring. She turned to needlework to supplement the family income, but with one small child to care for and another coming, she had not the strength to do regular sewing. At length family finances reached such a state that she could not afford to buy anything more. She refused to run up bills. But she did not lack for initiative. Although Henry failed at six different lumber yards to exchange printing for wood, Annie successfully arranged with the grocer and milkman for her husband to print advertising cards in return for a little cornmeal and milk.

In this time of bitter want a second child, Richard Fox George, was born.⁷

"Don't stop to wash the child!" ordered the doctor. "The mother is starving. Feed her!"

The only food in the house for Annie George was the loaf of freshly baked bread which a neighbor, the photographer, had just brought.

Henry George went in search of food—or money. He stopped first at his little printing office in the hope that some of the debt owing him and Isaac Trump had been paid. But no money had come in. There was no friend to whom he might turn for a loan, for all were as poor as he.

Frantically, he paced the streets. Annie *must* have food.

There had been a light but dismal rain, and the day was gray and damp. Everyone he passed looked cold and poor. Henry was growing desperate when a well-dressed man appeared. The shivering youth walked straight up to the stranger and demanded five dollars.

"What for?" the man asked as he studied the gaunt young face with its burning eyes.

"My wife has just been confined and I have nothing to give her to eat," said Henry.

Whether it was because of pity or fear of bodily assault, the man gave him the money without further question.

"If he had not," said Henry George long afterward, "I think I was desperate enough to have killed him."⁸

The struggle for mere subsistence continued. However, on some days fifty cents was paid on a bill at the office and on a few fortunate days there was as much as several dollars as the partner's share of the receipts. When the new baby was less than three weeks old the little family moved from the upper flat of the small wooden house on Russ Street, which had rented for eighteen dollars a month, to a smaller place on Perry Street where the rent was nine dollars. Mrs. George sewed for her landlady and earned the second month's rent. Her ambition of a comfortable home life was for her husband to make twenty dollars a week!

Henry George had kept diaries irregularly since his days at sea.⁹ In the entries for February, 1865, there appeared hints of his own black mood. Once he wrote: "I have been unsuccessful in everything."¹⁰ At another time: "Am in very desperate plight, Courage."¹¹ And again: "Don't know what to do."¹²

But on March 3, the sole entry consisted of two words: "At work." And on March 4: "At work. Got \$5 in the evening." He was setting type sporadically. He also tried to interest carriage builders in a new wagon brake—for he was seeking every way he knew to make money.

However, the lean period carried its lesson. The desire and resolution to equip himself more completely made Henry George use his spare hours for study and for practicing composition. One of his essays, "On the Profitable Employment of Time," which he mailed to his mother, shows not only his own longing for ease and wealth but his consciousness of wasted opportunity and his promised efforts of reformation.

"I am constantly longing for wealth," he wrote. And further,

"It would bring me comfort and luxury which I cannot now obtain; it would give me more congenial employment and associates; it would enable me to cultivate my mind and exert to a fuller extent my powers; it would give me the ability to minister to the comfort and enjoyment of those I love most. And therefore it is my principal object in life to obtain wealth, or at least, more of it than I have at present. . . ."

This was precious little. But Henry's first formal essay of his manhood indicated firm resolve. He went on: "To secure any given result it is only necessary to supply sufficient force. . . . It is evident to me that I have not employed the time and means at my command faithfully and advantageously as I might have done, and consequently that I have myself to blame for at least a part of my non-success. And this being true of the past, in the future like results will flow from like causes."¹³

As his style improved, Henry resolved to send letters to the newspapers. To his delight one letter discussing laws relating to sailors and another letter urging working men to think about political and social questions were printed. This success gave him courage to write a fanciful sketch, "A Plea for the Supernatural," which he sent to the magazine *Californian*, a weekly publication to which Mark Twain and Bret Harte were contributors.¹⁴ The story was accepted¹⁵ and was later reprinted in *The Boston Evening Gazette*.

This was a period of dark despair. But Henry George had learned that he could write.