

## ANNIE CORSINA FOX

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WHAT A TIME we live in, when great events follow one another so quickly that we have no space for wonder," Henry George wrote to his sister Jennie in 1860.<sup>1</sup>

There was much indeed to challenge the sobering youth. California felt the agitation of the oncoming Civil War in the fatal duel between Chief Justice David S. Terry of the California Supreme Court and David C. Broderick, the most outspoken anti-slavery man in the West. Broderick's death quickened the great debate on slavery and secession. And when John Brown was hanged after the Harper's Ferry raid a few months later, Henry was made conscious of the events across the continent by a letter from his father which concluded, ominously enough, "The end is not yet."

But California was growing amidst the turmoil and debate. In letters home, Henry noted the progress of the Pony Express and remarked that "next year we will in all probability have a telegraph across the plains and our evening journals will contain New York news of the opening."

It was during this period that the youth, who had pulled far away from the strict orthodoxy of his Philadelphia religious training, was drawn back "to the church" by two friends who introduced him to the preaching of the liberal and broad-minded Reverend S. D. Simonds, a Methodist. In 1860, Henry George became a member of the Methodist church. While his family had for generations been Episcopalians, the fact that the youth had joined any church caused great rejoicing in the home circle. "Oh, my Son," wrote his father, "what a thrill of joy your letter sent through us all, when we read that you had given your heart to Christ."<sup>2</sup>

On September 2, he became of age. Now he could join the typographical union and qualify as a journeyman printer. At journeyman's wages, he held a printing job for a short time and

was able to send money back to Philadelphia. Then came a long spell of intermittent work.

"All my society is of the rougher sex," he had written to Jennie some months earlier. "In fact I don't care much about making the acquaintance of any ladies, at least such as are found here."

But not long after his twenty-first birthday George Wilbur persuaded him to go to a party. Henry went reluctantly, for he danced poorly, disliked small talk, and took no stock of flirting.

The night was clear and fragrant with heliotrope and citrus blossoms. When the two youths arrived at the party—at the McCloskey home—the entertainment was in full swing. A tenor was bleating a sentimental ballad. The two youths waited on the porch and looked in through the windows.

The large living room was handsomely furnished and decked lavishly with flowers—but flowers all of one type, begonias—plants of differing sizes, colors, and varieties, blooming wherever a pot could be perched. The place was crowded with people. Young George's glance roamed from person to person but always came back to a small woman in her early fifties who was sitting sedately in a high-backed chair. Severely dressed in plain dark silk, she wore a rare lace shawl around her shoulders. Her only jewels were five small diamond stars, glistening against the velvet ribbon which banded her blue-black hair.<sup>3</sup>

"Who is that old lady?" whispered Henry.

"That's the grandmother, that's Mrs. McCloskey," answered Wilbur.

"Well, it's getting pretty late," said Henry after peering again through the window. "You know we have to get up early."

Wilbur laid an affectionate but detaining hand on his shy friend. The song burred on. Almost at the end of his endurance, Henry was about to bolt for home when the painful solo finished and a young girl glided into the scene.

Her widely hooped skirts of ecru piña cloth<sup>4</sup> floated about her like a cloud. Her brown hair was parted and drawn satin-smooth to a knot at the back of her head. Her beautifully modeled shoulders and arms were white as marble.

"Who is she?" Henry demanded.

"Oh, that's Mrs. McCloskey's granddaughter," Wilbur re-

sponded. "That's Miss Fox. The party's for her. This is her birthday."

"Let's go in," said Henry George.

Annie Corsina Fox, who because of her sedate and dignified demeanor had, from her thirteenth year, been addressed as "Miss Fox," was not what one might call a really pretty girl. Her features were too large and not sufficiently regular for prettiness. Her large, grave eyes dominated her thoughtful face. Her skin was so delicately fair that her nickname was "Peaches-and-Cream." She was small, barely five feet in height and tiny boned. Beautifully formed,\* she had exquisite shoulders and arms and little patrician hands. Water could be run under her instep and she wore a size one shoe.† Her voice was soft and well modulated; she sang naturally and melodically. She danced like a fairy. Indeed her passion for dancing was so great that at times it led her into foolishness. Once, at a ball, she made a wager with her partner that she could tire him out. She did—and three more partners, and the orchestra; and it was not until the arrival of her guardian-uncle, after two solid hours of waltzing, that she was peremptorily stopped from what might have developed in our day into a "dance marathon."

She was born in Sydney, Australia,<sup>5</sup> where her father, Major John Fox of the British Army, was stationed. There, when Fox was thirty-six, he had met and married the sixteen-year-old Elizabeth McCloskey, daughter of a prosperous Irish iron-monger and government contractor who had come with his family from Limerick. There the two daughters Teresa and Anna Corsina Fox were born.

But life did not run smoothly for the high-spirited British, Church-of-England soldier and his somewhat strait-laced Irish-Catholic wife—or rather between the husband and the mother-in-law. Elizabeth McCloskey sided with her mother; her marriage to Major Fox ended tragically in a separation.

\* At the birth of Henry George's second son, Richard, a neighbor woman who was a photographer and painter, and who was that night assisting as midwife, was so struck by the great beauty of Annie George's body that she asked the young husband for permission to photograph his wife nude. Her request was indignantly refused. It is characteristic of my mother that she considered this anecdote of too intimate a nature for inclusion in the present work.—Agnes de Mille

† This was a family trait. My mother also wore a size one street shoe. For dancing and bedroom slippers she had to go to the children's department.—Agnes de Mille

Anna—"Annie," as she was called—was five years old when Grandfather Henry McCloskey gathered up his family and again migrated,<sup>6</sup> this time to California.\* After establishing them in ample comfort in San Francisco, he returned to Australia to build a railroad. But he never completed this work; he contracted a fever and died. His daughter, Annie's mother, died soon after her separation from Major Fox. The cause of her death was given as consumption; her family believed it was a malady infinitely more complex—a broken heart in grief at the irrevocable parting with her soldier husband.

Mrs. McCloskey, now the matriarch of the family, reared the two children in comfort in San Francisco. She had three hobbies, or fads—fine china, fine shawls, and fine begonias. Once in the flower market for which the city was famous, she spotted an unusual begonia. "How much is that?" she asked. She was dressed simply, except for one of her rare shawls, and the merchant appraised her quickly and answered, "Oh, you couldn't afford to buy that plant."

Mrs. McCloskey was incensed. She replied instantly, and with an imperious gesture, "Send the begonia to my home!"

When it arrived she found to her dismay that the little flower had cost her eighteen dollars.

The McCloskeys lived in a house which had been brought in sections from Australia. The family in San Francisco also included a son, Matthew McCloskey, and Joseph Flintoff and his wife, a second daughter of Mrs. McCloskey. The two men affected the manners of the wealthy Spanish ranchers in the California of the 1850's and 1860's, sporting high, shiny riding boots, silver spurs, and large sombreros of the finest felt. Matthew McCloskey owned and developed real estate in the section of San Francisco known as "Happy Valley."

\* There is a family tale, told me by my mother, to the effect that on this trip the vessel ran into a hurricane. The crew believed themselves lost and worked in an agony of terror to save their lives. The captain, learning somehow that Annie Fox had been born with a caul over her face, lashed the child to a mast in the open weather. There she stood, a five-year-old baby, on the heaving deck, drenched with sea water and haggard with the wind, while the crew filed past and gently laid their hands on her. No person born with a caul could be drowned at sea.

She never forgot this episode. I believe in some way it may have given her a sense of strength and protective force. Time and again her husband and her husband's friends turned to her in moments of extreme crises for reassurance, for the talisman touch that would prevent their being swept away.—Agnes de Mille

When her granddaughters were old enough to go to school, Mrs. McCloskey sent them to the Sisters of the Order of St. Vincent de Paul, usually known as the Sisters of Charity, in Southern California. Most of their schoolmates were Spanish, and the atmosphere of the peaceful convent<sup>7</sup> in the beautiful mountain-encircled Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles reflected the old California before the coming of the "Gringos."\*

The bond between Tessie and Annie was peculiarly close. It was a cruel blow to Annie when the older girl left her to take the veil at the age of seventeen. As Sister Teresa, wearing the wide white cornet of the Sisters of Charity, she was sent to Vicksburg to nurse wounded Confederate soldiers. After the Civil War she became a teacher and rose to a high rank in her order.

Annie remained in Los Angeles for a time as a student-teacher after she finished her regular course at the convent school. She was a fragile girl and the Sisters' watched over her tenderly. She taught English to some of the Spanish girls and, in order to gain the benefit of the California air and sunshine, busied herself with picking flowers for the convent altars. When her grandmother's health began to fail she returned to San Francisco.

At the time of her seventeenth birthday party, when she met Henry George, Annie Fox was engaged to be married to an exemplary and charming young man of ample means. But before she had known the Philadelphia boy many months, Annie broke her engagement.

Henry George pressed his suit with many attentions and with as many gifts, mostly books, as he could afford to buy. When Mrs. McCloskey died, Annie went to make her home with the

\* The religious rituals were, as always in a primitive community, intensely dramatic. Annie Fox told my mother that Holy Week was awesome in its intensity. The statues were of course shrouded in purple, but the high altar was also veiled and shut away from view. At Easter dawn, with a burst of triumphant singing, the curtains were pulled back, and the altar, blazing with lights and banked with orange blossoms, acacias, and lilies from the mission garden, burst on the view of the congregation and gave forth such overpowering perfume and incense as to cause young girls to swoon as they fell on their knees.

It is wonderful that a sensitive child reared in this atmosphere could rid herself of all religious domination, and, although Annie Fox always devoutly believed in God and an afterlife, she disassociated herself from any specific church. Her children were baptized as Catholics only in deference to the older sister, Teresa Fox.—Agnes de Mille

Flintoffs and Uncle Matthew McCloskey became her guardian. The uncle liked young George but he was hardly enthusiastic about the court paid his niece by the delicate looking and shabbily dressed youth. It was plain that the youth's attentions were anything but platonic.