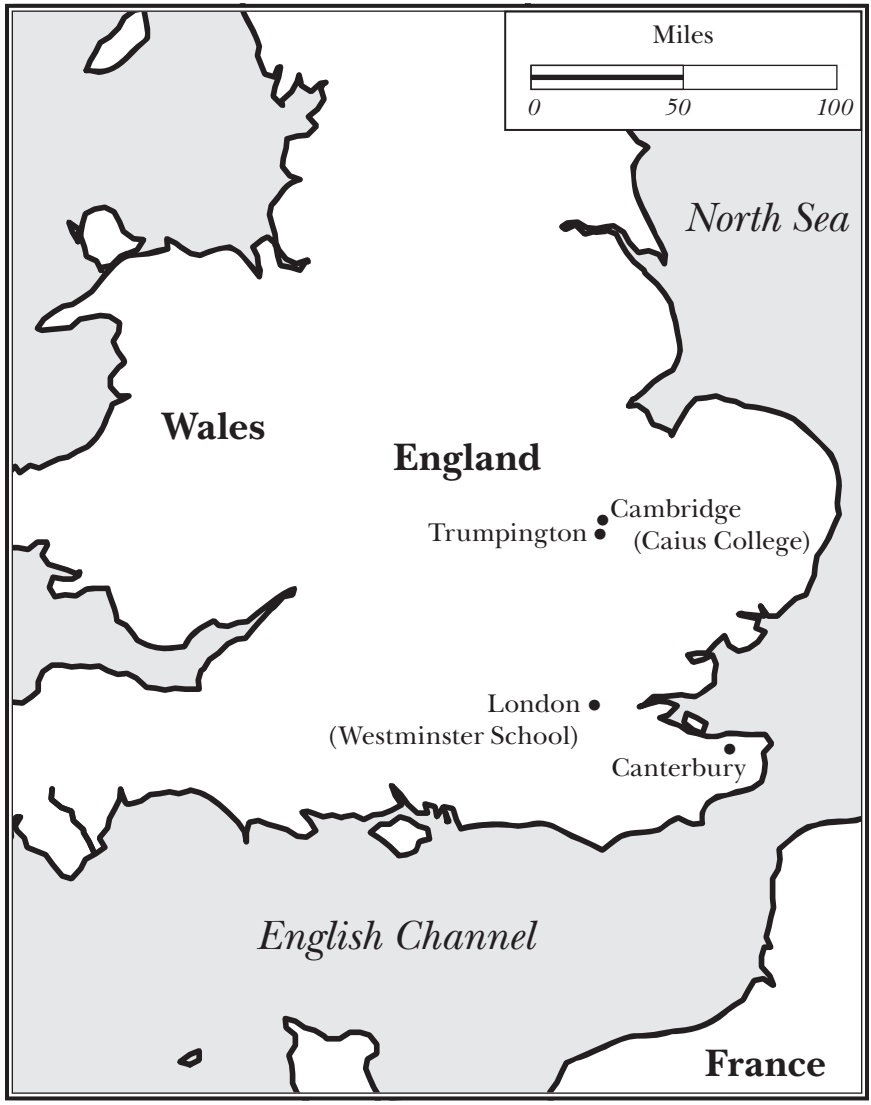
Henty's Early Days



George Alfred Henty

The Story of an Active Life

Chapter I

Early Days

We might know very little of the life of the late George Alfred Henty—writer for and teacher of boys, novelist, and one of the most virile of our war correspondents—but for one fortunate fact. His busy pen soon made him popular, and in course of time this popularity was sufficient to make editors of journals for the young realize that their readers would gladly learn something of the early life of the man whose vivid tales of adventure were being read with avidity wherever the English language had spread. In these days few are content to know a man only by his work, and even boys like to know something about the personality and experiences of the writers who have given them keen pleasure. As a result the inevitable came to pass, and the modern chronicler of personal details sought out the author. To his interviewers Henty told fragments of his past life, and these reminiscences were taken down in short or long hand, and built up into articles, and have remained, to bring before us vividly what would otherwise never have been known save perhaps by tradition.

It is strange now to reflect that the big, robust, heavy, manly-looking Englishman of whom these lines are written, was once a puny, sickly boy who was looked upon by his relatives as one who could never by any possibility attain to man's estate; but so

VIRILE: *vigorous, manly*
AVIDITY: *enthusiasm*
ATTAIN TO MAN'S ESTATE: *live to grow up*

it was. Here are his own words: "I spent my boyhood, to the best of my recollection, in bed."

Descended from an old Sussex family, George Alfred Henty was born at Trumpington, near Cambridge, on December 8, 1832, and it would appear that he was a confirmed invalid. This ill-health was the more unfortunate because it was in the days when doctors were inclined to be narrow-minded, and parents and guardians in almost every household had intense belief in the virtues of physic. Most mothers then were given to doctoring, and at springtime and fall considered it to be their duty to administer filthy infusions, decoctions, and very often concoctions, to unhappy boyhood; and a powder at night, to be followed by a nightmare of the draught that was to be taken in the morning, is a painful recollection to some of us.

Happy boys of the present generation! Why, who among them now know the meaning of words which must almost seem like cabalistic characters? Jalap, rhubarb, magnesia, salts and senna, gamboge, James's powder—these were all in constant request, without taking into consideration the secrets promulgated by the wicked writers of books on domestic medicine.

It was in those days that George Henty was born. He tells of an early removal at the age of five to Canterbury, to a fine old house whose garden ran down to the River Stour. Here for the next five years his mind became stored with those most wholesome of recollections connected with boy life. It was the bird, bee, and butterfly time, brightened by the presence of a grand trout stream, to whose banks he would creep, so as not to send the spotted beauties darting off in a flash of ruddy gold to seek some hiding-place from the gigantic shadow that had suddenly been cast athwart the stream. He tells, too, in many a page of his later life, how the influences of this good old garden were a solace and delight to him during

PHYSIC: *laxatives*
INFUSIONS, DECOCTIONS, CONCOCTIONS: *various homemade remedies*
DRAUGHT: *drink*
CABALISTIC: *mystical*
PROMULGATED: *put forward*

many a weary tramp or journey in the saddle far away; in the course of his journeys through Europe, the wilds of Asia, and the savage mountains and dense tropic forests and swamps of Africa.

The boy was fortunate, too, in his leanings towards natural history, for he speaks of a grandfather who was always ready to play the part of instructor to the young inquiring mind in regard to scientific matters, and explain the why and the wherefore of such objects as he collected.

When not confined to his bed, Henty attended a Dame school, where the love of reading was started, and grew and grew so that the sick boy's lot was softened to the extent that the weariness and suffering of confinement to his bed became almost pleasant in the forgetfulness begotten by books. That which was wanting in the way of education was made up in these long hours by reading. To use his own words, he "read ravenously"—romance, adventure, everything—perfectly unconscious, of course, of the fact that he was laying in a mighty store for the future, preparing himself, in fact, for the great work of his life, the broad and wide education of the boys of a generation to come.

In those days, though the classics hardly had place (there was little of Latin or Greek), he was piling up general knowledge such as comes to the lot of few lads now, in spite of the boasted advance in educational matters and all the elaborate apparatus and routine. And yet it must not be supposed that the boy's regular education was neglected. When ten years old there was an end to his simple country life, for though far from well he was sent to London to begin life in a private boarding-school, a life sadly interfered with by sickness and relapses into ailments more or less severe, among them being that terrible disease whose sequelæ have shattered many lives—rheumatic

ATHWART: *across*
SOLACE: *comfort*
DAME SCHOOL: *a school for young children run by a woman in her home*
WANTING: *lacking*
SEQUELÆ: *aftereffects*

fever. One of his ailments seems to have been near akin to that of the late Prince Leopold, namely, a tendency to profuse bleeding. For this he was attended by a well-known specialist of the time, whose great remedy for the boy's complaint was camphine, this being the popular term in those days for one of the refinements of the so-called rock oils, nowadays known as petrol or paraffin.

Henty recorded to one of his interviewers that he was so thoroughly dosed with this peculiar medicine that the specialist warned the nurse in these words: "I don't say that if you put a light to the boy he will catch fire, but I advise you not to risk it." This was accompanied with further counsel that the future chronicler of boys' adventures should not be allowed to handle sharp instruments, lest a cut or puncture should result in his bleeding to death.

Much reading in these early days had so influenced the boy that he had already become a story-teller, and, as is often the case with first attempts at writing, pleased with the jingle and flow of words, he had dropped into poetry. Now a young poet, as soon as he has satisfied himself with his lines and has carefully copied them in his best penmanship, burns to see himself in print. He then imagines, or is flattered into the belief, that numbers of people are as anxious as he to see his work become public; and it appears to have been so here, for owing to the well-meant kindness of a friend, certain of his early verse was printed, and it would appear to have been extremely sentimental and remarkably mild.

It was soon after this, when Henty was fourteen, that he went to Westminster School. Liddell was headmaster then, and the boy became a half-boarder, and in a very little while, in his boyish and very natural vanity, he let his tongue run a little too fast. He had written verse, and consequently esteemed himself

HALF-BOARDER: *a student who only has one meal per day provided by the boarding school*
ROASTING: *merciless ridicule*
ENSUED: *followed*
COVERT ALLUSIONS: *veiled references*

something of a poet, so it was not long before he mentioned the fact of his having his work in print. He quickly began to wish he had held his tongue. He had not counted upon the mischievous delight a pack of schoolboys would take in their special poet. If he had written Latin verses it would have been a different thing; but a love-tale with threatened difficulties to a lady was too much for them, and a long and continuous "roasting" ensued. Chaff flew, indirect and covert allusions were made, and then came bullying. Henty says: "It seemed as if the whole school bore a personal animosity towards poets, and as if they looked upon my publishing the unlucky book as a bit of 'side' unworthy of a Westminster scholar."

This particular poem was unfortunately lost, and the same fate befell another attempt written later, for the school banter did not crush out the rhyming faculties. The later work was written upon a more serious occasion, and, devoted to his future wife, it was cared for and preserved for long years as a valued treasure; indeed, only about ten years before his death, Henty was taking it up to town and accidentally left it in the railway carriage. Attempts to recover it proved vain, and though he offered a large sum of money as a reward, he never heard of it again.

As the lad's education progressed at Westminster it was not long before he began to realize that the curriculum was not complete, and that no boy's studies were perfect without a thorough knowledge of the noble science of self-defence. Indeed, he had not been long at the great school before he came in contact with one of the regular school bullies, who began to tyrannize until young Henty awoke to the fact that he possessed a high spirit and an absence of that weak pusillanimity which makes men slaves. He was no "mute inglorious Milton,"[1] though he aimed at being a poet.

[1] From "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray
SIDE: *arrogant pride*
FACULTIES: *abilities*
PUSILLANIMITY: *cowardice*
NO MUTE INGLORIOUS MILTON: *not someone who lives in obscurity*

The boy was father to the man he became, and he bore little before he turned in defiance and challenged his tyrant. The natural result was that he was thrashed out of hand and sent smarting with pain and mortification to where he could ponder over his defeat. But he was not of the mettle to sit down painfully under humiliation, and, to use his own words, "I soon changed all that."

It was something to learn, something to study; how to acquire the power, the science, which makes a comparatively weak man the equal of one far stronger, and, judging the boy by what he was as a man, it was from no desire to become bully in his turn that he took lessons in boxing, but from a genuine ambition to hold his own in the matter of self-defence and to be able to protect those who looked to him for help. It was with this desire that, later, when he left Westminster for Cambridge, at a time when the so-called noble art was at its highest tide, and when professors of the science had quite a standing at the universities, he continued its study, and one of the first professors to whom he applied for lessons (out of college) was the once celebrated Nat Langham, who, by the way, was the only man who ever vanquished Tom Sayers. Not contented with this, but being then in the full burst of his growing youth and strength—a sort of young athlete thirsting for power like a boyish Hercules—he took to wrestling, perfectly unconscious then of the good stead in which it might stand him in the future. In this sport he chose as his instructor a Newcastle man, one Jamieson, famed in his way as being champion of the Cumberland style as opposed to the Cornish. It must be borne in mind that all this was prior to the days of the Great Exhibition,[1] when pugilism was considered no disgrace, and before young men had begun to foster athleticism in other forms.

It was a strange reaction in the youth who had passed the greater part of his early life upon a sickbed, and it seemed as if

[1] The first World's Fair, held in London in 1851

OUT OF HAND: *at once*
METTLE: *disposition*
PUGILISM: *boxing*

the brave nature within him was exerting itself to throw off his natural weakness.

That thrashing he received in his early days at Westminster seemed to have roused him, spurred him on to gain strength, and he was encouraged too by the stirring times in which he found himself. Boating and cricket were all-important at Westminster. The studies were hard, but the masters, wisely enough, encouraged all sports; for the Westminster boys, as our chronicles have shown us, learned there to hold their own the wide world round. One need not here point to the long roll of famous names. These pages are devoted to one alone.

Henty takes a very modest view of his own prowess, and says of his life at Westminster: "Boating or cricket—you had your choice; but once made, you had to be perfect in one or the other. Fellows rowed then and played cricket then. They had to."

The Thames was their course. There was no St. Thomas's Hospital then, and the boat-houses were on the banks. The river was pretty handy to the great school, and at the sight of the Westminster crews the boatmen used to come across to fetch the boys. These were the days before the Thames Embankment, when the river sprawled, so to speak, at low water over long acres of deep mud, swarming with blood-worms, and though the river tides ran swirling to and fro the current was greatly quickened. Later the number of steamers increased and cut up the Westminster rowing, so that it went all to pieces. It was so greatly affected that the Old Westminsters' Club tried to move the sport to Putney; but it never regained its old standing. Westminster, however, though known best as a boating school, was a great cricketing one as well. At one time five Westminster men played in the All England Eleven; but Henty was not a cricketer. As a young athlete, he selected rowing. Both sports could not be managed; the standard was too high.

CRICKET: *a popular English sport, somewhat similar to baseball*
PROWESS: *exceptional skill*

Henty describes himself in his growing days and at Cambridge as a sort of walking skeleton; but he was big-boned, and the life he led as manhood approached made him fill out and grow fast into the big, muscular, burly man that he was to the end of his life. In fact, he has said that in later days, when he went down to the Caius College Annual Dinners, while he knew most of the men of his own standing, not one recognized him. And this can easily be grasped when it is understood that in his college days at nineteen he weighed nine and a half stone, while as a man in vigorous health he was as much as seventeen.[1]

He does not forget to credit his school with the education his *Alma Mater* afforded him. He says: "She did give me a good drilling in Latin. Perhaps not elegant classical Latin, but good, everyday, useful, colloquial stuff." In his time the masters were great upon the old dramatic author whom so many of our modern dramatists have tapped right through Elizabethan, Restoration, and more modern times, down to the present. In Henty's early days, just as is annually the custom now, one or other of Terence's comedies[2] was chosen for a performance by the Queen's Scholars, while every other boy as a matter of course had to get up one play as the lesson of the year as well, and doubtless, as has been the case with many a schoolboy in turn, would fall a-wondering how it was that the great Latin poet possessed an Irish name.

Latin verses and Latin colloquial phrases were hard enough to pile up, while parents and guardians, ready enough to complain, found fault at so much time being devoted to the dead languages to the exclusion of those which are spoken now. Hear, ye grumblers, what George Henty says thereon to an interviewer:

"When I went out to the Crimea, and later, to Italy, I found that everyday Latin invaluable. It was the key to modern

[1] A "stone" is a British unit of weight equal to fourteen pounds; Henty weighed 133 lbs. and 238 lbs. respectively.

[2] Roman playwright Terence (195-159 B.C.) wrote six comedies.

ALMA MATER: *school or college; literally "nourishing mother" in Latin*
COLLOQUIAL: *informal*

Italian, and a very good key too. But more than that, it meant that wherever I could come across a priest I had a friend and an interpreter. Without my recollections of Terence I don't know where I should have been when I first tackled life as a war correspondent."

He speaks of Westminster as giving him his first introduction to boating, not merely rowing, but boating with the use of the sail. There was a man on the Surrey side in those days, named Roberts, from whom the boys used to hire their four-oared and eight-oared cutters, wager boats, and the occasional randan for three, two oars and sculls. This man had a small half-decked boat which Henty first learned to handle. In it he learned also the stern necessity of always being on the alert after hoisting sail—a necessity which doubtless gave rise to the good old proverbial warning, "Look out for squalls." Yet, in spite of everyone knowing and often using this warning phrase, it is too often neglected by careless boating people, who will not realize what a duty it is never to make fast the sheet.

Here at Westminster and in the little half-decked boat commenced the healthy passion of Henty's life, and he acquired something of the skill which enabled him through manhood to go to sea and feel no fear even in rough weather, strengthened as he was by the calm confidence that accompanied, in the broad sense of the term, "knowing the ropes."

The days of a public-school boy came to an end, and with their conclusion arrived the feeling that he was a man. But after all it was the schoolboy feeling of manhood, though it was very manly in one thing, for it brought with it the knowledge that he had spent too much time in play, and with it too the feeling that he must make up for the past.

Hence it was that he went in for what he termed a burst of hard reading as soon as he reached Cambridge and entered at

CUTTERS: *rowboats*
WAGER BOATS: *tiny boats holding only one person*
RANDAN: *a rowboat rowed by three people*
SCULLS: *small, narrow boats*
MAKE FAST THE SHEET: *fasten the rope controlling the sail*

Caius College. In the full realization of his failings he proved that he was still a boy, for he set to and began reading night and day for about three weeks, so as to acquire as much as should have taken him about six months' work.

As a result nature said nay, and gave him a severe lesson in the shape of an illness which knocked him over, so that he had to go down for a year's rest, as it was termed, but it was in reality a good spell of health-giving instructive work which greatly influenced his future career. In fact, he now began to pick up the information which he so largely utilized afterwards in his books. Here was his first study for *Facing Death*, one of his most widely read boys' stories—boys', though it was as much read by men. For he went down into Wales, where his father possessed a coal mine and iron works, and at the latter he acquired such knowledge and insight into engineering as to enable him at a critical time in his career as a war correspondent to call himself an engineer. Reporting himself as an English engineer desirous of studying the practical effect of great gun fire, he had no difficulty in getting permission to accompany the Italian Fleet in what was virtually the first battle between ironclad men-of-war.

Henty's subsequent military training, together with his physique and stern decision of manner, made him naturally an excellent leader of men. In ordinary civilized life he was one who, at a gathering, would be pretty well sure to be selected as chairman, for upon occasion he could abandon his quiet soft-spoken manner, fill out his chest, and, if slightly roused by opposition, speak out with a decision and a firmness that would lay antagonism low; while, if it happened to be in a lower stratum of not to say savage but uncivilized life, his training had made him a picked disciplinarian, one who had his own particular way of maintaining order and gaining the

PHYSIQUE: *physical size and development*
STRATUM: *layer of society*
OBSTREPEROUS: *unruly*

affections as well as the obedience of those whom he had to command.

This was simple enough in the army with disciplined men, but there were occasions when his services were selected to guide and govern the undisciplined and those of the roughest and most obstreperous nature.

Upon one occasion he, the cultivated scholar and Westminster boy, was placed as foreman, or as it was termed amongst the men, "ganger," over a strong body of men engaged upon the construction of some small military railway. His men were a very lively party, extremely insubordinate at first, and ready if matters did not go exactly as they pleased—if the work seemed too rough, or the supply of available strong drink too handy—to throw down their tools, or reply with insolence to their foreman, whose calm, quiet ways and speech seemed to invite resistance. It was in ignorance that the fellow who offended did this thing, and he did not offend a second time, for Henty was leader with plenary powers, and he had but one way of dealing with a rough. It was to order him at once to the place which he used as his business office, and with quiet firmness and decision, and in the presence of his following, to pay the man off there and then, to the great delight of the rest of the gang, who knew what was to follow. The offender was paid in full and told to be off from the line. He, of course, retaliated with an outburst of flowery language, noting the while the gathering together of his mates. Henty meantime was quietly taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves preparatory to showing the unbelieving ruffian how a muscular athletic English gentleman, a late pupil of a great professor of boxing, could scientifically handle his fists and give the scoundrel, to the intense delight of the lookers on, a thoroughly solid and manly thrashing. This invariably ended in the offender crying, "Hold! Enough!" and accepting

INSUBORDINATE: *disobedient*
INSOLENCE: *extreme rudeness*
PLENARY POWERS: *unlimited powers*
PAY THE MAN OFF: *give the man the money owed him*
PREPARATORY: *in preparation*

his punishment without bearing malice; and in almost every case the gang was not only not weakened by the loss of a man, but it maintained a more willing worker than it had possessed before.

As may be readily supposed, the gentleman ganger lost no prestige amongst his men by such an exhibition of his prowess, for he knew most accurately with whom he had to deal, that is to say, so many big stalwart men of thews and muscle, such as our contractors have utilized for linking land to land with road and bridge, men of untiring energy and endurance, but with the mental ability of children. These formed Henty's gang, and to his credit be it recorded that his treatment proved as efficacious as it was firm, the punishment being given calmly and in cold blood, to the astonishment of the man who received it.

STALWART: *strong, sturdy*
THEWS: *strength*
EFFICACIOUS: *effective*