

## MARK TWAIN'S UNCOMPLIMENTARY PORTRAIT OF BRET HARTE

**T**HE republication in London of "Snowbound at Eagle's," "Cressy," and of other of Bret Harte's stories lends special timeliness to a pen-portrait of Harte which appears in one of the "Unpublished Chapters from the Autobiography of Mark Twain" now running in *Harper's Magazine*. It seems that Mark Twain first came into intimate association with Bret Harte in the 'sixties in San Francisco. Mark was earning his living as a reporter on the *Morning Call*, while Harte, on an upper floor in the *Call* building, was acting as private secretary to a Mr. Swain, superintendent of the United States Mint. Mark Twain and Harte were both writing for a paper called the *Californian*, which also numbered among its contributors Prentiss Mulford, Charles Warren Stoddard and Ambrose Bierce.

Bret Harte, says Mark Twain, was "one of the pleasantest men I have ever known. He was also one of the unpleasantest men I have ever known." We read further:

"He was showy, meretricious, insincere; and he constantly advertized these qualities in his dress. He was distinctly pretty, in spite of the fact that his face was badly pitted with smallpox. In the days when he could afford it—and in the days when he couldn't—his clothes always exceeded the fashion by a shade or two. He was always conspicuously a little more intensely fashionable than the fashionablest of the rest of the community. He had good taste in clothes. With all his conspicuousness there was never anything really loud or offensive about them. They always had a single smart little accent, effectively located, and that accent would have distinguished Harte from any other of the ultra-fashionables. Oftenest it was his necktie. Always it was of a single color, and intense. Most frequently, perhaps, it was crimson—a flash of flame under his chin; or it was indigo-blue, and as hot and vivid as if one of those splendid and luminous Brazilian butterflies had lighted there. Harte's dainty self-complacencies extended to his carriage and gait. His carriage was graceful and easy, his gait was of the mincing sort, but was the right gait for him."

Mark Twain knew Harte intimately in the days in San Francisco. He knew him intimately when Harte came East five years later, in 1870, to take the



editorship of the proposed *Lakeside Magazine* in Chicago, and "crossed the continent through such a blaze of national interest and excitement that one might have supposed he was the Viceroy of India on a progress, or Halley's comet come again after seventy-five years of lamented absence." He knew him pretty intimately thenceforth until he crossed the ocean to be Consul, first at Crefeld, in Germany, and afterward in Glasgow. Harte never returned to America.

Once, on a visit to Mark Twain in Hartford, Harte declared that his fame was an accident—an accident that he much regretted for a while. The "Heathen Chinees" had been written in jest. The explosion of delight that it caused was not entirely welcome for the reason that Harte was already at work on such things as "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "Tennessee's Partner."

In this as in other matters Harte was not as fortunate as he seemed to be. It might have been better, Mark Twain goes so far as to say, if Harte had died in the first flush of his fame. When he started East in his new-born glory, with the eyes of the world upon him, "he had lived all of his life that was worth living." He was "entering upon a career of poverty, debt, bitterness and a world-wide fame which must have often been odious to him." The article concludes:

"There was a happy Bret Harte, a contented Bret Harte, an ambitious Bret Harte, a hopeful Bret Harte, a bright, cheerful, easy-laughing Bret Harte, a Bret Harte to whom it was a bubbling and effervescent joy to be alive. That Bret Harte died in San Francisco. It was the corpse of that Bret Harte that swept in splendor across the continent; that refused to go to the Chicago banquet given in its honor because there had been a breach of etiquette—a carriage had not been sent for it; that resumed its eastward journey, leaving behind the grand scheme of the *Lakeside Monthly* in sorrowful collapse; that undertook to give all the product of its brain for one year to an Eastern magazine for ten thousand lollars—a stupendous sum in those days—but collected and spent the money before the year was out, and then began a dismal and harassing death-in-life which was to cease only at the grave."