

Bret Harte

Dickens in Camp



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DICKENS IN CAMP

BY BRET HARTE

WITH A FOREWORD BY
Frederick S. Myrtle



San Francisco
JOHN HOWELL
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FOREWORD

"Dickens In Camp" is held by many admirers of Bret Harte to be his masterpiece of verse. The poem is so held for the evident sincerity and depth of feeling it displays as well as for the unusual quality of its poetic expression.

Bret Hart has been generally accepted as the one American writer who possessed above all others the faculty of what may be called heart appeal, the power to give to his work that quality of human interest which enables the writer and his writings to live in the memory of the reading public for all time. By reason of that gift of his Bret Harte has been popularly compared with his great contemporary beyond the seas, greatest of all sentimentalists among writers of fiction, Charles Dickens.

Just how far the younger author selected the elder for his ideal, built upon him, so to speak, & held his example constantly before his mental vision, may be always a matter of debate amongst students of literature. There can be no question of the genuineness of the Californian writer's admiration of him who made the whole world laugh or weep with him at will. It is recorded Harte that at seven years of age he had read "Dombey & Son," and so, as one of his biographers, Henry Childs Merwin, observes, "began his acquaintance with that author who was to influence him far more than any other." Merwin further declares that "the reading of Dickens stimulated his boyish imagination and quickened that sympathy with the weak and suffering, with the downtrodden, with the waifs and strays, with the outcasts of society, which is remarkable in both writers. The spirit of Dickens breathes through the poems and stories of Bret Harte just as the spirit of Bret Harte breathes through the poems and stories of Kipling. Bret Harte had a very pretty satirical vein which might easily have developed, have made him an author of satire rather than of sentiment. Who can say that the influence of Dickens, coming at the early, plastic period of his life, may not have turned the scale?"

Another of his biographers, T. Edgar Pemberton, says his admiration for Charles Dickens never waned, but on the contrary, increased as the years rolled by. Harte himself, referring in later years to his childhood days, to his father's library and the books to which he had access, spoke of "the irresistible Dickens." Mr. Pemberton states, also, that Bret Harte always felt that he owed a deep debt of gratitude to Charles Dickens.

Small wonder, then, that, Bret Harte no matter how unconsciously, should have adopted here and there something of the style and some of the mannerisms of Dickens. This is directly traceable in his writings, even to the extent of his resorting, here and there, to oddities of expression which were peculiarly Dickensian.

The English writer, on his part, reciprocated in no small degree the feeling of admiration which his works had aroused in the young American. His biographer, John Forster, relates that Dickens called his attention to two sketches by Bret Harte, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," in which, writes the biographer, "he had found such subtle strokes of character as he had not anywhere else in later years discovered; the manner resembling himself but the matter fresh to a degree that had surprised him; the painting in all respects masterly and the wild rude thing painted a quite wonderful reality. I have rarely known him more honestly moved."

Dickens gave evidence of this feeling of appreciation in a letter addressed to Harte in California, commending his literary efforts, inviting him to write a story for "All the Year Round" and bidding him sojourn with him at Gad's Hill upon his first visit to England. This letter was written shortly before Dickens' death and, unfortunately, did not reach Bret Harte until sometime after that sad event.

When word of the passing of "The Master," as he reverently styled him, reached Bret Harte he was in San Rafael. He immediately sent a dispatch across the bay to San Francisco to hold back the forthcoming publication of his "Overland Monthly" for twenty-four hours, and ere that time had elapsed the poetic tribute to which the title was given of "Dickens in Camp" had been composed and sent on its way to magazine headquarters in the Western metropolis. That was in July, 1870.

Late in the '70s, while on his way to a consulship in Germany, Bret Harte visited London for the first time.

There he was taken in charge by Joaquin Miller, the Poet of the Sierras, who in his reminiscences relates: "He could not rest until he stood by the grave of Dickens. At last one twilight I led him by the hand to where some plain letters in a broad, flat stone just below the bust of Thackeray read 'Charles Dickens.' Bret Harte is dead now and it will not hurt him in politics, where they seem to want the hard and heartless for high places, it will not hurt him in politics nor in anything anywhere to tell the plain truth, how he tried to speak but choked up, how tears ran down and fell on the stone as he bowed his bare head very low, how his hand trembled as I led him away."

Many years later, in May, 1890, Bret Harte, in response to a request for a facsimile of the original manuscript of "Dickens in Camp" replied in part:

"I hurriedly sent the first and only draft of the verses to the office at San Francisco, and I suppose after passing the printer's and proof-reader's hands it lapsed into the usual oblivion of all editorial 'copy'.

"I remember that it was very hastily but very honestly written, and it is fair to add that it was not until later that I knew for the first time that those gentle and wonderful eyes, which I was thinking of as being closed forever, had ever rested kindly upon a line of mine."

The poem itself breathes reverence for "The Master" throughout. To residents of California, who revel in the outdoor life of her mountains & valleys, the poem has a particular attraction for its camp-fire spirit which to us seems part and parcel of that outdoor life. It is a far cry, perhaps, from the camp-fires of 1849 to the camp-fires of 1922, but surely the camp-fire spirit is the same with us in our Western wonderland today as it was with those rough old miners who sat around the logs under the pines after a day of arduous and oft disappointing toil. Surely the visions we see, the lessons we read in the camp-fire glow, are much the same as they were then. Surely we build the same castles in the air, draw the same inspirations from it. Biographer Forster pays the poem this tribute:

"It embodies the same kind of incident which had so affected the master himself in the papers to which I have referred; it shows the gentler influences which, in even those California wilds, can restore outlawed 'roaring campers' to silence and humanity; and there is hardly any form of posthumous tribute which I can imagine likely to have better satisfied his desire of fame than one which should thus connect with the special favorite among all his heroines the restraints and authority exerted by his genius over the rudest and least civilized of competitors in that far, fierce race for wealth."

In the twining of English holly and Western pine upon the great English novelist's grave the poet expresses a happy thought. He calls East and West together in common appreciation of one whose influence was not merely local but worldwide. He invites the old world and the new to kneel together at the altar of sentiment, an appeal to the emotions which never fails to touch a responsive chord in the heart of humanity.

Frederick S. Myrtle

San Francisco, California
April, 1922



DICKENS in CAMP

Above the pines the moon was slowly drifting,
The river sang below;
The dim Sierras, far beyond, uplifting
Their minarets of snow.

The roaring camp-fire, with rude humor, painted
The ruddy tints of health
On haggard face and form that drooped and fainted
In the fierce race for wealth;

Till one arose, and from his pack's scant treasure
A hoarded volume drew,
And cards were dropped from hands of listless leisure
To hear the tale anew;

And then, while round them shadows gathered faster,
And as the firelight fell,
He read aloud the book wherein the Master
Had writ of "Little Nell."

Perhaps 'twas boyish fancy,--for the reader
Was youngest of them all,--
But, as he read, from clustering pine and cedar
A silence seemed to fall;

The fir-trees, gathering closer in the shadows,
Listened in every spray,
While the whole camp, with "Nell" on English meadows,
Wandered and lost their way.

And so in mountain solitudes--o'ertaken
As by some spell divine--
Their cares dropped from them like the needles shaken
From out the gusty pine.

Lost is that camp, and wasted all its fire:

And he who wrought that spell?--
Ah, towering pine and stately Kentish spire,
Ye have one tale to tell!

Lost is that camp! but let its fragrant story
Blend with the breath that thrills
With hop-vines' incense all the pensive glory
That fills the Kentish hills.

And on that grave where English oak and holly
And laurel wreaths intwine,
Deem it not all a too presumptuous folly,--
This spray of Western pine!

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