

PICKWICKIANS AND CALIFORNIANS

After a short investigation, I came to the conclusion that many students who are familiar with Charles Dickens do not know Bret Harte. This, in my humble opinion, is unfortunate. Now you may ask me what Bret Harte, an American short story writer, has to do with Dickens, let alone the Pickwick Club as the title of this article suggests. In this case we are confronted with an odd fraternization: the American and the Englishman go hand in hand.

It would be pedantic and wearisome to analyze the likeness in methods of master and pupil, for all readers of both must feel it and I honestly hope that this short introduction to Bret Harte will stimulate interest in the creator of the modern American short story.

Harte himself confessed his obligation by constant praise of the older writer. Dickens acknowledged this and even went so far as to find in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat", two of Harte's most famous stories of the old California gold-rush days, "such subtle strokes of character as he had not anywhere else in late years discovered; the manner resembling himself, but the matter fresh to a degree that had surprised him.

What Dickens did in England—the ever living personalities which he created by imagining English cockneys, English villains, English boys, with all their energies devoted to an expression of what was most individual, peculiar, and typical of them—just this did Bret Harte endeavor to accomplish with his Californians. The truth by exaggeration was his art too. He looked at life about him with the eye of the romancer, and gave us a Poker Flat which is just as false to the actual reality in the Sierras, as it is true sentimentally. In this he follows Dickens. But Mr. Pickwick is more valuable than any Victorian gentleman, and the Kentuck of Roaring Camp will outlive all the true characters of California's gold-rush days.

On the other hand, there is a basic difference between Dickens and Bret Harte and this difference can be seen in the present case. Mr. Pickwick himself and, for that matter all the other Pickwickians are caricatures. No one will deny this. Kentuck may be false through exaggeration of the character, but there is a restraint in Harte's work. With Pickwick we go into hysterics of laughter; with Kentuck we smile at his amused and bewildered reaction to The Luck. The baby grabs his finger and Kentuck, embarrassed before the other miners, says nothing. Only when he is outside the room does he look at his finger with a certain reverence. "The d-d little cuss. Rastled with it." Some may find this espisade, and Kentuck's thoughts over it, sentimental. But it makes for excellent literature. This same type of sentimentality is found in David Copperfield and there it is much more thickly layed on.

Further proof of the difference between Dickens and Harte is of the practical impossibility of one ever meeting any Pickwicks, Snodgrasses or Winkles but how often have we seen what we believe to be a hard-hearted man suddenly melt and show a more human side when faced with a child or a woman in distress? The Kentucks are legion; the Pickwicks are few.

It would be interesting to apply to Dickens' novels the rules that Poe set down for the short story and, of course, we will have to bring Bret Harte back into the picture. Poe states that there should be no extraneous material and that suspense and emphasis should prevail. Bret Harte, at least in the short stories, certainly observes this rule. But I am bold to suggest that in the *Pickwick Club*, Dickens sins against it. What really do "The Tale of the Parish Clerk" and that of the "Goblins Who Stole a Sexton" have to do with the *Pickwickians*? Take these tales out and we still have a perfect piece of delightful nonsense. Suspense is not the main interest here. We are simply faced with a gallery of hilarious nitwits and Dickens' only purpose is to make us laugh.

Harte also presents a gallery of portraits both pathetic and satirical. One is amused by the important air taken by Stumpy in "Roaring Camp" and moved by his rough handling of Cherokee Sal.

In both writers the characters are very strongly outlined. The bald, plump *Pickwick* pulsates with the inner life of an immortal. Snodgrass and Winkle are glaringly alive and as a whole, all the characters from Mr. *Pickwick* down to Job Trotter afford a wealth of fun—of course, fun in its *Pickwickian* sense which is something more than ordinary fun.

But the general level of the short story in the America of 1850 was by no means elevated immediately to the heights of the masters Poe and Hawthorne. There were, perhaps, more trite stories written in America in this period than in England, and only a few that were better constructed. Yet, there was steady progress. The advance was made by milestones and in this instance three writers present themselves for marking the progress made. Fitz James O'Brien was the first; another was Edward Everett Hale; the third was Bret Harte. The first writer to gain recognition in England for his short stories and the first regionalist to gain a broad reputation was Harte.

With Harte, neo-romanticism returned. He romanticized the substance of the West into a fairy-tale. He had the advantage of a section already romanticized in every American's heart by its natural splendor and by that release from the dictates of moral order which had accompanied the gold-rush to the west coast and was, with similar literary results, to accompany the gold-rush to the Klondike. All the elements were given out of which the ingenious talent of Bret Harte wove the pattern of the typical American short story.

Yet we must not be deluded. Bret Harte, though most widely read, is not the author of the best short stories of the nineteenth century. Hawthorne is not widely read except in school English agencies. Poe has a large following in America, but his success in England is more a success of esteem than anything else. Bret Harte, however, was and is pretty generally known on both sides of the water.

In the years that the short story was just getting a foothold, he appears as an advance agent of a fiction in American life for Englishmen as well as of Californian habits for the Easterner, with an audience evenly distributed through much of the English-speaking world.

Harte's rise to popularity was of the sudden over-night type. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" published in the new *Overland Monthly* for August 1868 by a reluctant staff who feared the tale immoral, brought instant recognition from the coast. "The Outcasts of Plover Flat", which appeared in January 1869 in the same periodical, spread his fame still further around the world. Reputation sought the author even in his own country. "Poker Flat" has a success equal to "The Luck".

A third story "Miggles" appeared in June of the same year: This, too, was considered another masterpiece, though not quite equal to the first two.

In 1871, Harte had achieved fame and was on his way to the East. The success of his short stories spread to England. A share of this success was due to such permanencies of genius as lead to imaginative observation, another share to the material of which California offered a part, and a chiefly large one to the form in which this material was cast in the stories that he made from it. It is this last cause which is involved with the development of the short story.

The reading and the understanding of Harte's stories will be fully enjoyed if one biographical note of the author is known before hand.

Bret Harte was of mixed blood and this fact may explain his undying tolerance in both religious and racial conflicts. Throughout his life, in his writing and in his actions, he always displayed a particular sympathy for persons of mixed blood. Other writers pictured half-breeds as skulking cowards or villains: in Harte's stories they were never bad; on the contrary, were apt to be heroes. He always took the side of the oppressed race, whether Chinese or Indian, in his troubles with the White Man. In half a dozen of the most entertaining poems, white roughnecks are bested by Chinese or Indians, and in several of his stories he pictures the brutality of the rougher elements of the old West towards these despised races.

The stories mentioned above and the ones that we will meet as we go along were of a sort wholly new in literature. In them as well as in "Tennessee's Partner" and "The Idyl of Red Gulch" there is never a happy ending, never a young hero or heroine, and in only one of them is there the faintest trace of a love story. In all of them the leading characters are the sort of folk whom fiction writers up to that time had scorned—they were not nice people. Publishers and critics saw that here, with the possible exception of Dickens, was the most original writer of the century; certainly the most original American writer.

It is hard to find a real villain in Harte's writings; there is a faint trace of decency or kindness in even the hardest of them. Nor are his infrequent heroes plaster saints. In Bret Harte's stories, pioneer and mining camp life seem to bring out the better side of the worst people and the uglier traits in the better ones. His weaklings are so wistful and forgivable that the reader usually comes to like or even to love them.

So clearly distinguishable was this kind of short story after Bret Harte had used it to advertise his Forty-niners, so little recognised as a type before, that it was natural for certain writers to refer to the Californian as the inventor of this form of narrative.

Bret Harte in his stories treated life as it was, with sympathy for its methods, with a welcome to its particularities and no more elimination than was artistically necessary. In a word, Harte broke from the European models and created the truly American short story.

The new method of story writing used by Harte has already been hinted at.

Bret Harte's stories depart from the common method of introduction, climax and conclusion. The emphasis in his stories is on the climax, and that climax is the heart of the situation. By using local color, Harte "turned the trick".

In his application of this method, he advanced upon Hale's first stories where the grasp of a situation rather than its emphasis attracts; and he advanced upon O'Brien whose skill is not equal to his imagination.

The fresh life depicted throughout his stories made his contemporaries hail him as a genius.

Tennessee's Partner, John Oakhurst, Yuba Bill, Kentuck are as immortal as any character. "Miss" would join them if it were a better told story.

Bret Harte's stories raised a crop of "wild life" tales after them, but they were also followed by an equally flourishing growth of narratives in which the striking situations provided by the most civilized life were written into some kind of literature. In the decade after Harte's success the short story became the usual medium.

—RICHARD S. PATTEE '60