

On the Dangerous Friendship

by Rick Foster

The mysteries of love are more famous, but the strange ways of friendship can be equally as entangling, demanding, rewarding, and painful as all but the most intense love affairs.

Friendship was important to Bret Harte – at least to Bret Harte the writer. Two of his early, famous stories, “Tennessee's Partner” and “The Iliad of Sandy Bar,” deal with the theme of broken friendships and of loyalties that somehow survive the break. In 1900, less than two years before his death, he published the tragic story “Three Vagabonds of the Trinidad” about the friendship between an abandoned Chinese lad, an Indian, and the abused white boy who betrays them.

Harte's friendship with Mark Twain, or rather with Sam Clemens, since Mark Twain was, as yet, only a *nom de plume* – began in 1864 when the “Washoe Giant” relocated to San Francisco and found himself reporting for the *San Francisco Call*, whose offices shared a building with the San Francisco Mint where Harte worked. Though nine months the younger man, Harte was the far better established writer at the time. And as Twain would admit, he was the more accomplished stylist. Moreover, Harte was a gifted editor who immediately sensed that there was something very special growing under Twain's

rough prose.

They seemed to develop a mutual admiration society. In 1866 Twain would write: “Though I am generally placed at the head of my breed of scribblers in this part of the country, the place properly belongs to Bret Harte, I think, though he denies it, along with the rest.” And Harte, in the articles he wrote for newspapers in Massachusetts, said of Twain: “I think I recognize a new star rising in this western horizon.”

That year of 1866 was when Twain began to taste national fame. The Jumping Frog story had been published and copied in numerous papers and commented upon widely enough that Twain's claim to be “placed at the head of my breed” is probably correct. To the intensely competitive Twain this was sweet.

Still, Twain continued to need Harte's mentoring hand. When he finished the manuscript for his first full length book, *The Innocents Abroad*, he asked Harte for help. Twain would later write: “Harte read all the MS of the ‘Innocents’ & told me what passages, paragraphs & chapters to leave out—and I followed orders strictly.”

And as late as January 28, 1871, in a letter to the editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Twain wrote: “Bret Harte trimmed and trained and schooled me patiently until he changed me from an awkward utterer of coarse grotesqueness to a writer of paragraphs and chapters that have found a certain favor in the eyes of even some of the very decentest people in the land.”

Nevertheless, trouble was brewing. Harte's star was also rising. While he wasn't earning the big royalties that Twain was

cashing for his breakthrough travel book, *The Innocents Abroad*, Harte was taken more seriously by the literary establishment, which at that time was in Boston. His short stories were extravagantly praised and he signed the richest contract yet offered any author for a year's worth of contributions to the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Harte moved from California to the East late in that Winter of 1871 and was lionized by the greats of Cambridge including Oliver Wendell Holmes, Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell—the Brahmins who would not accord the same respect to Twain. Twain felt wounded in his ambition and plotted to regain the championship.

Meanwhile many things were going well for Mark Twain. He made a fabulously good marriage to Olivia Langdon. Livy was wealthy, lovely, better educated than Twain, wonderfully tactful, and crazy about her husband. She had everything that a Mark Twain could hope for in a wife – except for good health. They built a showplace home in Hartford, Connecticut.

Harte's marriage was not so lucky. His wife was neither wealthy nor thrifty, nor was she beautiful, nor particularly well educated, nor devoted to her husband's career. She did have a beautiful singing voice. Though he never recorded any ill thoughts of her, there were rumors about his bad marriage—some of them critical of him, some of her.

In the Fall of 1876 Harte proposed that Twain and he collaborate on a play. Twain accepted eagerly and they set to work with Harte often visiting in the big Hartford house. Harte was famously good with children and became close to Twain's

daughters, particularly Susy, the eldest and most precocious.

By all reports – except Twain's later innuendos – Harte was also on excellent terms with Livy. Nevertheless, something happened during or just after the collaboration on the play. Twain would later hint that it had to do with a remark Harte made that was critical of Livy.

It didn't help that the play failed. Twain wrote that it was Harte's fault, though it was Twain who had the chance to fix its problems during a lengthy tour before the New York opening.

Harte's financial position had become precarious. His rich contract with the *Atlantic* was in the past. He had invested over a year writing the novel *Gabriel Conroy* which was a commercial and critical disaster. The play was not helping support his family. His fluency as a writer of short stories had deserted him.

For some months Twain exhibited a bewildering inconsistency in his dealings with and talking about Harte. He offered to hire him, at meager wages, to assist him in writing another play. Harte felt deeply insulted and refused. When Harte was put forward for a minor diplomatic post – Commercial Agent in Crefeld, Germany – Twain went to extremes to see that he didn't get it, even writing President Hayes a letter in which he defamed Harte's character. Fortunately, Twain was unsuccessful. Harte got the appointment and served for several years in Germany and Scotland as his writing career stabilized.

Although Harte's record of foreign service seems to have been completely satisfactory, Twain never lessened the vehemence of his attacks. In 1878 he wrote to their mutual

friend, William Dean Howells: “Harte is a liar, a thief, a swindler, a snob, a sot, a sponge, a coward, a Jeremy Diddler, he is brim full of treachery, and he conceals his Jewish birth as if he considered it a disgrace.” Howells evidently did not take this ranting seriously since it was just at this time that he defended Harte to his wife's cousin, who happened to be the President.

Harte and Twain never met again. Twain's rancor never went away. In 1895, giving an interview to an Australian newspaper, he said: “I detest him, because I think his work is 'shoddy.' His forte is pathos but there should be no pathos which does not come out of a man's heart. He has no heart, except his name, and I consider he has produced nothing that is genuine. He is artificial.”

Even during the last years of his life, and after Harte's death, when he was dictating the chapters for his autobiography he couldn't let go of the subject. Among many other gems, he said: “In the early days I liked Bret Harte and so did the others, but by and by I got over it; so also did the others. He couldn't keep a friend permanently. He was bad, distinctly bad; he had no feeling and he had no conscience.” As so often with Twain, he was factually incorrect. Harte had a considerable circle of good friends who stood by him and his work until his death in 1902.

Harte wrote nothing in counterattack to the verbal aggressions of Mark Twain. Perhaps he let his character Sandy Morton in “Two Men of Sandy Bar” speak for him: “. . . he has wronged me in a private way: that is *my* business, not *yours*; but he was *my* partner, no one shall abuse him before me.”