

BRET HARTE'S CHOICE BITS

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Bret Harte's choice bits by Bret Harte

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[circa 1885]

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BRET HARTE.

SEVERAL years ago, Thomas Starr King, then unknowingly near the end of his short but noble and glowing life, was guiding an acquaintance through the dingy, gold-strewn recesses of the Government Mint building in San Francisco. Pausing before entering the Secretary's little office, he said: "Now I want you to meet a young man who will be heard of far and wide some of these days." The visitor went in and was introduced to Francis Bret Harte, then Secretary of the Branch Mint. We all know how the later career of the young writer has more than justified

the affectionate prediction of Starr King; for, since that day, Bret Harte's fame has, to borrow the language of his admiring German translator, "extended from the coasts of the Pacific Ocean to the English coast of the North Sea. His works have drawn hearts to him wherever the language of Shakespeare, of Milton, and Byron is spoken."

A man who has so many readers must needs inspire a kindly curiosity to know something of the antecedents in a life which has given such generous promise of nobler works to come. Mr. Harte was born at Albany, New York, in 1839. He was christened Francis Bret Harte; but his second name,—an old family one,—was that by which he was familiarly known among home friends and acquaintances. Later in life, the initial of his Christian name was dropped altogether, and the world learned to know and love him by the somewhat crisp title of "Bret Harte."

Young Harte grew up surrounded by refining influences; his father was a teacher of girls, and a ripe and cultured student withal. Left fatherless, Harte wandered off to California in 1854, dazzled with the golden visions which then transfigured that distant land; and, won by the fantastic romance which stories of the early Spanish occupation, sudden wealth, surprising adventure, and novel life and scenery invested the country, he cast

nimself into the changeful stream of humanity which ebbed and flowed among the young cities by the sea, the pine-clad ridges of the Sierra, and the rude camps of the gold-hunters which were then breaking the stillness of long unvexed solitudes. No age nor condition, no quality of manhood, nor grade of moral or mental culture was unrepresented in that motley tide of migration. The dreamy young student, the future poet of the Argonauts of 1849, drifted on with the rest.

For two or three years he, like all the restless wanderers of those days, pursued a various calling and had no fixed abode. An unsatisfied desire for change, a half-confessed impatience with long tarrying in any spot, seemed to possess every soul. Mining camps and even thrifty towns were depopulated in a single day, the unnoted casualties of their rough life emptying a few places, the rest being eagerly left behind by men who drifted far and wide; their lately coveted "claims" were quickly occupied by other rovers from other fields. Harte mined a little, taught school a little, tried his hand at type-setting and frontier journalism, climbed mountains and threaded ravines as the mounted messenger of an express company, or acted as agent for that company in some of the mountain towns which we have learned to know so well as Sandy Bar, Poker Flat, and Wingdam.