

George Bernard Shaw

Playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was introduced to Mark Twain in London in 1907. Twain had come to England to receive an honorary degree from Oxford, and he had taken the same boat and train as Archibald Henderson, Shaw’s biographer, who introduced the two writers at the railroad station where they bantered for the benefit of the crowd of journalists that surrounded them. Shaw invited Twain to have lunch at his flat in Adelphi Terrace a week or two later. Twain was immediately taken with Shaw—“that brilliant Irishman,” as he later referred to him—and the two became fast friends. “Shaw is a pleasant man,” Twain wrote in an autobiographical dictation, “simple, direct, sincere, animated; but self-possessed, sane, and evenly poised, acute, engaging, companionable, and quite destitute of affectation. I liked him.” Shaw wrote to Henderson that “I consider Mark Twain America’s greatest writer by far.” Shaw observed that Twain “had a complete gift of intimacy which enabled us to treat one another as if we had known one another all our lives, as indeed I had known him through his early books, which I had read and revelled in before I was twelve years old.”

Letter to Samuel L. Clemens

10 Adelphi Terrace WC
3rd July 1907

My dear Mark Twain—not to say Dr Clemens (though I have always regarded Clemens as mere raw material—might have been your brother or your uncle)

Just a line to excuse myself for running away today. A domestic bargain was made to the effect that I should not keep you all to myself; so I cleared out to give Charlotte & Max a good turn. I had my reward at the dentist’s.

I meant to ask you whether you had ever met William Morris. I wont ask you now, because it would put you to the trouble of answering this letter; so let it stand over until I look you up in America. But what put it into my head was this. Once, when I was in Morris’s house, a superior anti-Dickens sort of man (sort of man that thinks Dickens no gentleman) was annoyed

by Morris disparaging Thackeray. With studied gentleness he asked whether Morris could name a greater master of English. Morris promptly said "Mark Twain." This delighted me extremely, as it was my own opinion; and I then found that Morris was an incurable Huckfinomaniac. This was the more remarkable, as Morris would have regarded the Yankee at the Court of King Arthur as blasphemy, and would have blown your head off for implying that the contemporaries of Joan of Arc could touch your own contemporaries in villainy.

I am persuaded that the future historian of America will find your works as indispensable to him as a French historian finds the political tracts of Voltaire. I tell you so because I am the author of a play [*John Bull's Other Island*] in which a priest says "Telling the truth's the funniest joke in the world," a piece of wisdom which you helped to teach me.

yours ever
G. Bernard Shaw