

MARK TWAIN WRITING COMPETITION

In 2001 the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, repository for a large collection of Mark Twain's manuscripts, held a contest in conjunction with the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine: to furnish a concluding third chapter to Twain's unpublished manuscript, *A Murder, a Mystery, and a Marriage*. The contest was originally proposed by Twain himself 125 years earlier, though it did not take place during his lifetime. Twain's novella was published by W.W. Norton in October, 2001, when the contest winners were announced. The following is the winning entry.

Story background: The first two chapters of Twain's story introduce the Gray family of Deer Lick, Missouri. Mary Gray, daughter of John and Sarah Gray, is about to become engaged to Hugh Gregory. But her father learns that his wealthy but estranged brother Dave has just revised his will and named Mary as his heir. Since Dave hates Hugh, John forbids the betrothal in fear that his brother will revoke the legacy. The family is in a state of unhappiness and upset. There is an early snowfall, and John inspects his farm lands. In the middle of a field of freshly fallen snow he discovers a man lying unconscious, and there are no footprints or other disturbances around him to indicate how he got there. As the stranger regains awareness, he speaks in several foreign languages, beginning with the question "Qui suis-je?"

Those who entered the writing contest were invited to provide a murder and a marriage, as well as a solution to the mystery of how the stranger arrived in John Gray's snow-covered field. There were over five hundred entries in the International Category of the competition.

(More about the Mark Twain Writing Competition may be found at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library website: www.buffalolib.org.)

CHAPTER 3

Carolyn Korsmeyer

For six weeks the stranger had lain feverish in the upstairs room at the Gray farm, muttering incoherently and occupying the bed while young Tom slept on the trundle. At first the boy enjoyed his mysterious visitor and strutted about the school yard, boasting to his friends about the courage required to sleep adjacent to a madman. The charm of his situation soon wore thin, however, as he was awakened frequently during the night by ejaculations of delirious foreign babble. Alas, the poor man could not be sent away in this condition. He became the charge of the Grays by virtue of happenstance, since he who discovers a fellow man in need assumes a mantle of responsibility, however inadvertently. Though never before the most sociable of households, the Gray farm became a hub of visitations from the kind and the curious, bearing gifts of foods, remedies, and speculation.

The schoolmaster, a transplant from Minnesota, thought he detected the cadence of Swedish in the sick man's ravings, but his forays into the tongue of his father elicited only a reply in baffling German. The Reverend Hurley, sensing the miracle of speaking in tongues - indeed of braying at unprecedented length in tongues - read to him in his best pulpit voice from the Book of Acts:

"And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and

resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance!"

But after an indignant stare the stranger uttered an effusion of barely recognizable Latin and fell back in a swoon.

As his fever diminished the stranger settled into English of a stilted sort. He became acquainted with his hosts and expressed his gratitude for their hospitality, but he could not recollect his own name and was helpless to introduce himself to them. "Qui suis-je?" he murmured to himself at night, staring mournfully from the narrow window and irritating Tom to distraction. Eventually, he came to be known simply as "Babel" and was accepted as a peculiar but harmless newcomer to Deer Lick.

Poor Mary, once hopeful betrothed-to-be, felt herself ill-used. In the first aftermath of her heartbreak she sneaked off frequently to meet Hugh, to steal kisses behind the tool shop, to lean against him as he fixed the iron bands around the barrels in his father's workshop. She held his hand - when it was unoccupied with staves - and harbored defiant visions of marrying against her father's wishes.

"You're a brave lass, Mary," declared Hugh, "and I love you even more for it."

This stalwart man had never comprehended her father's opposition, for the sweat of his own labor had earned him quite enough to support a wife, he thought, even without the expectations from his father's eventual demise. In his simple way he was overjoyed that Mary still seemed ready to cleave to him in matrimonial union. Whenever Hugh showed signs of proposing a marriage founded only on love and his own industry, however, a certain reluctance overcame his beloved, for in truth she was enough of her father's daughter to find the idea of marriage somewhat dimmed by the prospective loss of her uncle's money. Hugh, she began to notice, was a slow man, massive as a bull. In contrast, the wasted frame of Mr. Babel possessed a pretty delicacy: his sunken eyes glowed with fever and mystery, and the curve of his lips, cracked and sore as they were, suggested a gentle breeding as foreign to Deer Lick as the man himself.

As for John Grey, he was awash in consternation. At night he lay awake following paths of calculation that looped and tangled in grievous confusion. His estranged brother Dave lay at the center of his fulminations, just as he had for the past twelve years. Why had Dave changed his will? Why now? No affection for Mary had prompted his bequest, John was sure. Indeed at times his suspicion grew so stout that he wondered if there was really a new will at all or just a story spread to arouse vain hopes. Yet even the distant possibility of all that money falling to his daughter kept John firm in his opposition to her marriage. In truth, Dave had wreaked his revenge more cannily than perhaps even he realized, for John was as fixed on his hatred of his brother as he was on obtaining his money. It may be hard to forgive and forget, but forgiving requires a degree of forgetting, and obsession is a kind of punishment for the sin of failure to forgive.

"So he thinks he can fool me with his promise for Mary," John thought over and over. "So he thinks I won't see through his plot. He reckons to kill me with suspicion, he does, but I'll fix his wagon. He won't cut me short again, the way he did with the farm, when all I needed was a small loan, and he treated me like I was a stranger and not his own flesh and blood, and now he dangles before my daughter all his money, only to be snatched away again..." Thus roiled John's hot thoughts, and so focused was he on unraveling the intentions of his brother that he quite lost sight of those who lived under his own roof.

He might have confided in his wife had he been a better man, but he retreated instead into bitter silence. In response, Sarah proved herself to be his match and not a better woman. After the first blast of her husband's angry decision, Sarah sighed gustily and drooped her shoulders, ready with her plaint on behalf of Hugh and young love and future grandchildren. But as John paid no heed to these subtleties she straightened up again and lapsed into sullen resentment. John was holding the entire household hostage to his anger, she felt, he and that odd Mr. Babel. For Mary could not marry, Tom could not sleep, and she herself was left to minister to the sick with her food and medicaments and the good resources of her garden. Her acrimony grew as she cooked and cleaned and prepared the herbals for Babel's recovery, especially the lily of the valley infusion that Culpeper touted for memory. Would that his memory would return, and he would figure out where he belonged! Anywhere but here. After a lifetime of meekness, Sarah was discovering she had a backbone that few would have discerned before, but it was a thorny and unpracticed scaffolding built on bitterness. Her life had looked to be on the brink of easing, what with Mary's plans with Hugh and her husband's recollecting how to smile again. And now it was all ruined. She ceased to speak to her husband except over the dinner table. And when he failed to notice her silence she began in her mind to parallel the thoughts that churned about in his, and to envision Mary's legacy in terms of her own domestic projects. She surveyed the house and imagined improving changes: Fresh glazing in the windows, she considered, for they rattled something fierce. A new hearth rug...

As Babel recovered he proved to be an affable if somewhat addled conversationalist, quite adept with his hands. He untangled skeins of wool, fixed small kitchen appliances, and repaid his imposition on young Tom by instructing him in mathematics. Neat columns of numbers soon covered the margins of Tom's school work. Babel stared at the marks from his own pen, discovering himself to have been a man of learning and facility, for surely he wrote an educated hand. True to his new name he kept up a continuous, pleasant patter, while probing his hidden capacities, figuring that he might infer from what he could do some facts about who he had been. But if fragments of the past returned, he kept them to himself. Babel, whoever he might be, was evidently a man who at some time had learned caution.

The weather warmed, and Mary introduced him to the paths down to the river, now sweet with spring flowers just beginning to peek from beneath their new leaves. In the clearing by the water they rested in the warming grass, the breeze ruffling her hair and stirring the ribbons around her throat. She gazed at him, and he gazed back, a bit perplexed that this country girl should be examining him so closely; but her eyes were pretty, and here in the open air he sometimes felt a sharp stir of memory. It came with the wind, which caressed his cheek most teasingly. Birds wheeled far above in the firmament, and as the sky darkened towards evening and the clouds gathered around the setting rays, he left the river with his eyes fastened quizzically on the heavens.

"You seem stronger today," encouraged Mary. "Ever so much better than before. And your color is returning. Perhaps your memory will return soon too."

Babel uttered a rather belated "yes," then collecting himself and remembering his manners, (these, at least, he could remember), he added gallantly, "I shall certainly not forget pleasant afternoons such as this." Mary smiled and took his arm.

Far away at the continent's edge at a spot quite remote from Babel's inquiring gaze, a receding sphere lifted in the thermals and began its long waft northward, and the three remaining members of the North American Weather Balloon Team carried on their mission. They had made good

speed in the last months, especially after the sudden windstorm that had jettisoned some of their loosely fastened ballast. What a pity that it had also blown away that poor fellow who had claimed he could draw maps, but what could they have done? No sense in going back for the remains, for he was likely to have been pulped in the fall. No one grieved greatly, for he had been a late addition, hasty even, and but for his persuasive tongue and nimble fingers he would have been left behind. They had dutifully estimated the coordinates of his fall just in case there were next of kin to be informed, but the figures were only approximate, for they were not sure how far off course they were and the cloud cover had been thick.

It was of an evening shortly thereafter that John Gray spied Babel and his daughter returning hand in hand from the river. At first he thought he had caught her out with Hugh, and he made ready to vent paternal anger at this blatant flouting of his edict. But as they grew nearer he realized that the man was not robust enough to be Hugh. The glow of happiness surrounding Mary quite outshone Babel's perpetual air of bewilderment, and Gray, as a rule not a prescient man, suddenly foresaw a new request for his blessings. He was thrown into a fresh welter of blundering calculation: if Mary should wed Babel, would she still inherit? Or would Dave disapprove of a foreigner in the family and change his will again? Would there be enough money to sustain a woman with an incompetent babbler of a husband, and can a woman even marry a man without a name? No thought of his daughter's happiness complicated his figuring, but it was just as well, for he was sufficiently stymied by the difficulty of reading his brother's mind. Sarah called him twice for dinner and finally gave up, for curse any man whose stomach doesn't command its own needs. Well past dark John Gray stood like an ancient tree dead to the world around but so stubbornly rooted that no one considers it worth the effort of removing.

If hatred in the heart of man inevitably led to murder, Deer Lick would boast fewer citizens today. Sarah's resentment festered and grew, and the prospect of widow's weeds began to seem rather attractive. Mary, wrapped in growing love, became quite careless of the hurt she was causing Hugh, whose suspicions were aroused as Babel's health restored his natural handsomeness. Darkness entered that good man's heart, and Hugh pondered ways and means of ridding Deer Lick of the stranger. As for John, so pulled was he by the contingencies of Dave's decisions that he became quite paralyzed, sending off impotent sparks in all directions so that no one escaped his ire. If Dave can be imagined to be chuckling with wicked glee at all the consternation he had wrought, one would complete the picture of a family where hate had overshadowed love.

But hate can be a passive emotion, exercised quite thoroughly in the imagination. John Gray was proof of that. In his case hate rendered him incapable of any action whatsoever. It takes more than hate to kill; it takes need, and cunning, and a clear end in sight. So long as John tried to read his brother's mind he was innocent of ever gaining a clear sight of anything at all, though he seethed like a kettle boiling over and alarmed his fellow citizens as he slouched through town on his weekly errands.

"There's a man fixing for trouble," they speculated.

"Dave, you'd better watch out," said the intimates of that sanguine citizen.

But Dave, with the condescension that elder siblings rarely outgrow, scoffed at such warnings. "John was born feckless and he'll die bootless, and long before I will!" he declared. Besides, his conscience was clear. He had reinstated Mary Gray as his legatee, the money would stay in the family, and if his gesture of friendship had been misunderstood, that was hardly on his head.

It was the Reverend Hurley who attempted to sprinkle oil on these troubled waters, as was only his Christian duty. "Mr. Gray," he admonished each man, "All you need do is extend your hand in friendship. No family should be so divided." Dave readily expressed his willingness, though his sincerity might be suspect, for he realized his brother would never accept the gesture. As for John, he said nothing at all in response to the good Reverend's offices, but stood in fulminating silence until the clergyman turned away.

"I can speak to a tree more easily than to you these days, John. If you can't bring yourself to care enough for your family to bend that stiff neck of yours, you ought to mind your immortal soul!" No more could he do, and Hurley strode away to prepare for his Sunday sermon, on which occasion he would preach from the first letter of John: "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still."

As if a broker of conciliation, that very afternoon Mr. Babel met Dave Gray on Deer Lick's main thoroughfare. Clusters of Wednesday shoppers, Sarah Gray among them, witnessed the meeting from across the street, and their gossip dwindled as they collectively but vainly strained to hear the two men speak.

Had they been nearer, they would have overheard an unremarkable exchange:

Dave: "Why, I do believe you must be the Mr. Babel of whom I've heard so much."

Babel: "Indeed, Sir. But I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance."

Charmed by the diffident manners of Babel, Dave introduced himself, mentioning casually his relation to Babel's host quite as if nothing was amiss within the family. The conversation continued with standard pleasantries and slightly awkward gaps in speech, as Babel hunted for the appropriate word and Dave wondered where the devil the fellow learned to talk so strange. But from across the street the two appeared deep in confidences. Sarah was filled with new and potent thoughts.

"John," she said later to her husband, breaking long silence, "John, it is foolish to carry a grudge so long. Mind what the Reverend has said and make your peace with Dave."

John did not reply, though his eyes turned upon her in mournful reproach.

"Is this infusion doing you any good at all, Mr. Babel?" she asked her visitor as she served him his afternoon tonic.

"You know, I do believe that it is starting to have an effect," said Mr. Babel tentatively. "In fact just this morning I awoke and was quite sure that..."

Sarah looked at him expectantly. "Yes, Mr. Babel?"

"That, well, I believe that, I have an idea that I might be named... Pierre." This revelation was uttered with a slanted look that Sarah missed, as for her own reasons she had averted her face.

"Just Pierre? That's French, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, Jean-Pierre. That would sound better with Babel, would it not? This is perhaps me: Jean-Pierre Babel."

And as Jean-Pierre Babel, or J.P. as he popularly came to be known, Mr. Babel began to court Mary in earnest as well as to cultivate in his modest manner the acquaintance of Dave Gray. Deer Lick rejoiced that the poor man's memory was returning. And Babel himself had come to a private conclusion: he was not a man either to return to his own past or to settle for the quiet outpost of Deer Lick. It didn't require much memory to recall that he didn't like living in small backwater towns, and in his own subtler way he had adopted John Gray's interest in the problematical inheritance. He had gained patience as well as health during his long convalescence. Dave Gray was old, even older than John. How long could a man live in a place like this? Surely, not very much longer; and Babel had time. Yes, whoever J.P. Babel had been before, now he was a patient man.

The same could not be said of Mary. Life with her parents was becoming intolerable, and Hugh was now quite a pest, alarming even, as he was wont to appear before her suddenly when she ventured out alone and to stick persistently by her side declaring his affection. She preferred action to biding time. Thus it transpired, from Babel's patience and Mary's impatience, that one rainy weekend they hitched up the horses and traveled by buckboard over the nearby state line and into Arkansas, where it was well-known that a justice of the peace could easily be found who was somewhat less attentive to the legal details required of marriage than were the sterner officials of Missouri. By Monday, Mary and Babel were man and wife.

Neither John nor Sarah was pleased. In fact had either been capable of full voice rather than silent seething at this point in their travails there would have been an uproar. They stood shoulder to shoulder as they faced their daughter in outraged disbelief, of one mind for the first time in months, and in unison quite helpless to alter the outcome. The deed was done. It might not even be entirely legal, despite the paper with the embossed seal that Mary showed. However, as Mary had craftily surmised, the scandal of dissolving the marriage, leaving the girl's virtue in question, was worse than putting up with a union of dubious standing. John again fell to calculating Dave's response, and his countenance settled back into its dark, abiding glare. But Sarah fixed her attention elsewhere: much as she loved her daughter, she did not overestimate her attractions and was suspicious of Babel's motives in marrying so suddenly. John was not the only one whose thoughts dwelt on money.

Mary and Babel did not move away from the farm immediately, but rather occupied the upstairs room together while Tom retreated to Mary's former alcove below. A strong man now, or as strong as he ever was likely to be, Babel took to spending his afternoons in town, where often he might be spied entering the offices of Dave Gray, who had unexpectedly moved his place of business to the main street and was prospering even more than before. Neighbors who noticed this were careful not to mention it to John, as was Babel himself.

Babel's conversation with Sarah was not so constrained. "You know Mother Sarah," he mentioned one day, "Mr. Dave Gray has taken some of your remarkable infusion, and he reports that he believes it is helping his memory as well as it is mine. He adds and subtracts with greater speed than before and can recollect scenes from his childhood that he had entirely forgotten." Babel looked at her carefully with these words, which had been only slightly embellished. The feud was wearying him, and if a sip or two of the lily brew were enough to mend a fence, it was well worth the nasty taste.

"Indeed, has he?" said Sarah after a pause. "Well then, J. P., you must take him a fresh batch soon."

And she went into the garden that very evening, for everyone knows that herbs are best harvested after the sun has set. She dug the lily roots from beneath the low, curving leaves, and after the night was dark enough she added a bit from the stems and leaves of a taller plant that grew nearby, one in full and robust flower crested with bell-like blossoms with spotted throats. She was not herself a woman of action. But she had lived for decades with a difficult man, and she recognized how action may be taken indirectly by implanting ideas in others. And Sarah was a gardener; she knew that one must cast seeds in many directions so that some may take root.

Hugh, ablaze with grief and fury since he discovered his beloved was the wife of another, strode to the place he had learned that Babel would be: Dave's office. The dark street was deserted at this time of night, but a lamp still burned in the window there. Tonight Babel worked late for his new uncle by marriage.

"It is to escape the dismal air of evening at the Gray farm," Sarah had confided. "The poor man can't bear the silence of his father-in-law and prefers to return late when only Mary is awake. Ah Hugh, if you could only know what it is like there now..."

Sarah was a good woman, thought Hugh, but he could not match her sympathetic heart. Babel was a scheming hypocrite. A wife-stealer, a liar, a bogus, conniving foreigner who had snatched away Hugh's rightful love. The town of Deer Lick, the state of Missouri, and the green earth itself would be a cleaner place when Babel had gone, and if it had to be by Hugh's own hand, then God have mercy on his soul.

So lost in thought was he that Hugh strode with a heavy tread, which belatedly he softened as he neared Dave's office, feeling his way along the wall in the deep shadow of the building. Behind the curtained glass he saw the light go out, and there was a peculiar bumping noise within, almost as though the lamp had fallen to the floor. Footsteps—halting, dragging footsteps—drew near the door. Hugh raised his shovel high to bring it down on the head of the man who would emerge: a heavy shovel with a sharp edge, more than sufficient to crack the crown of a delicate weakling like Babel. The muscles of his powerful shoulders tensed and Hugh's eyes dimmed with hot tears as he prepared to strike. The door opened, and he commenced the dreadful swing. But the man who staggered from the door was already falling, doubling over, clutching his throat as he pitched forward, and he escaped Hugh's shovel by a hair's breadth. The shovel's terrible arc missed its target and brought its murderous trajectory full round to land on Hugh's own kneecap.

The shocking blow sent Hugh's remaining wits reeling, and he fell to the ground himself, dizzy from the pain in his broken knee. Gradually, through his own gasps and groans, he became aware of approaching steps, and a pair of cracked and muddy boots appeared before his tearing eyes.

"Hugh?" said John Gray's voice. "Is that you? What have you done to yourself?"

Hugh's scattered senses returned just in time to realize that what he had done to himself was pale in comparison to what he had barely not done to Babel. His painful position on the ground obviously required explanation, and his thoughts assembled with unaccustomed alacrity.

"Tripped over my own shovel like a fool," he gasped. "And fell. But I'm not the only one. Look just there."

John raised his lantern and pushed back the slide. A beam of light fell across the features of the fallen man. At the sight thus illuminated Hugh uttered a terrible groan. He could scarcely believe his eyes, for there lay before him someone altogether different from the man he had aimed to kill. Sprawled in the cooling dust of the dark street was not Babel at all but the contorted form of Dave Gray. Dave Gray not smiling and dapper as he had been that morning, but with a twisted stare and a trickle of froth dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

Imagine Hugh: a would-be murderer whose victim had escaped him, whose weapon had turned itself upon him, and who was just righteous enough in what remained of his soul to recognize with dawning horror and relief that he had escaped the bitterest fruit of revenge—success.

Imagine John Gray, coming to see his brother after long years, though whether in reconciliation or revenge he had not yet decided. In his heart were the lines he had repeated over and over: "Dave, it's time brothers spoke again." But in his pocket was the hunting knife he had carried into the woods that morning.

"Dave," he whispered, a terrible, ragged sound. "Dave." He dropped heavily to the ground beside his brother. "Ah, Dave, have you cut me short again?"

Hugh limped into the street and called weakly: "Help! Call the doctor! Mr. Dave Gray has been struck with apoplexy." But it was he who required the ministrations of Dr. Edgerton, for Dave Gray was beyond earthly help.

The balloon trip was delayed by months, and the carefully recorded coordinates that had marked the spot where M. Du Fresnoy, gambler late of Marseilles and debtor extraordinaire, had tumbled to his death became quite blotched by weather and other mishaps. Thus it happened that a belated search party scoured the Iowa prairies all summer for the body of the fallen man, while on a river boat far from Deer Lick Mr. Babel embarked for St. Louis with his wealthy bride.

Sarah and John Gray settled back into silent domesticity. He spent his remaining years ruminating of an evening over his brother's last night and their aborted meeting, imagining what might have been but for that sudden and appalling death. On especially dark nights he took out the Bible and read from the first letter of John: "Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." He wondered: could it be that Dave, dying before the words of conciliation had been uttered, had wreaked a final revenge and deprived his brother of the promise of heaven? "Ah, Dave," he whispered, "Dave, have you cut me out again?"

Occasionally Hugh visited them. He could not shed the guilt for the murder he had committed in his heart, and he sometimes wished to ease his burden and speak of it to John. But the words never formed, and he rested his hands on his stout cane and stared wordlessly into the fire while John read and sighed.

Sarah had her own reasons for silence, remembering the long glance that Babel had given her that evening when he had returned unexpectedly early from town. A long, challenging look, accompanied by the dissonant background of his usual patter. She trusted that he and Mary would not feel the urge to return to Deer Lick with great frequency. Her house was tranquil again, and

domestic order reigned. Mary had been generous with her legacy. But in a sort of superstitious penance, Sarah never replaced the glazing in the windows, and when the wind was high it rattled the glass and shivered the curtains just as it had the night that Babel had fallen into their lives. A certain corner of her garden she allowed to go to seed, and nature reclaimed the evil and the good that grew there.