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The Mark Twain Annual, Volume 11, 2013, pp. 109-112 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

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Notes

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At Sotheby's New York in June 2010, the Bancroft Library succeeded in acquiring a unique, and uniquely treasurable, Mark Twain manuscript. Titled "A Family Sketch," it has never been published. The short manuscript (sixty-four pages) sold for nearly \$250,000, making it the priciest Mark Twain manuscript ever sold. Clemens, who kept a keen eye on the market value of his words, would be pleased.

If the manuscript's monetary value is impressive, its literary value is inestimable. It differs from Clemens's other autobiographical writings (such as his *Autobiography*, in process of being published by the Mark Twain Project) in that it is a private document—as private as one of his notebooks, and even more private than a personal letter, since a letter is expected to have at least one recipient. In one passage Clemens speaks of distributing this sketch to family friends as a private memorial; he later struck out that passage, however. And so the intended audience of the "Family Sketch" is made unclear; as Clemens never did anything to publish it, perhaps it has none. Unlike the manuscripts the Mark Twain Project is going to publish with it—Susy's biography of her father and the family anecdote anthology "Small Foolishnesses of Susy and 'Bay' Clemens"—this piece was not cannibalized for use in the *Autobiography*. It speaks all the more directly to the reader, in the relaxed and intimate tones of a special confidence.

The "Sketch" is now in the Mark Twain Papers, and the Mark Twain Project is preparing it for publication in the series "Jumping Frogs: Undiscovered, Rediscovered, and Celebrated Works by Mark Twain" (published by the University of California Press).

Clemens wrote the "Family Sketch" in 1901 or 1902, and revised it in 1906. It started out as one of a series of attempts to eulogize and celebrate his eldest daughter, Susy, who had died of spinal meningitis in 1896. The sketch's original title, indeed, is "In Memory of Olivia Susan Clemens"; but, as Clemens wrote

on, his subject got away from him—let us say rather he saw that memories of Susy belonged to a larger body of memories, just as Susy had belonged to the larger life of the household. Soon Clemens found himself memorializing, in a way he did nowhere else, the whole family. Way led on to way, and soon Clemens was writing about the family servants, and indeed the extended household: the servants, horses, ducks, and at least one unusually stupid cat.

It is not quite like anything else. Clemens wrote about his family elsewhere, of course—anecdotes of their lives are found in the *Autobiography*, naturally. But in the *Autobiography* the recollection of family life is not his main concern: there, in fact, he daringly *has* no main concern, except to set down the fleeting contents of his mind. Consequently, the “family portrait” as given in the *Autobiography* is strewn piecemeal around the volumes. Then, too, it is skewed by Clemens’s awareness that parts of the text were to appear in a contemporary magazine; inhibition—and perhaps a perceived need to keep the material at least intermittently “funny”—got in the way.

By 1906, a heartbreaking number of these family and friends had died; the mood of the “Family Sketch,” however, is not funerary but exuberant. Clemens’s “people” are alive again, and his eye and ear for telling detail are at their sharpest. And it *is* funny; and it is a sensitive and sometimes surprising portrait of nineteenth-century domestic life.

Among other things, the “Family Sketch” is Clemens’s most substantial and extended portrait of George Griffin, the family’s African American butler. George, beloved of the whole family, was among other things noted for his gifts as a betting man; well enough for servants, perhaps, but quite contrary to the family’s official teachings:

Every day, in the Hartford racing-season, he made large winnings; and while he waited at breakfast next morning he allowed the fact and the amount to escape him casually. Mainly for Susy’s benefit, who had been made to believe that betting was immoral, and she was always trying to wean George from it, and was constantly being beguiled, by his arts, into thinking his reform was imminent, and likely to happen at any moment. Then he would fall—and report a “pile” at breakfast; reform again, and fall again before night; and so on, enjoying her irritations and reproaches, and her solemn warnings that disaster would overtake him yet. If he made a particularly rich haul, we knew it by the ostentatious profundity of his sadnesses and depressions as he served at breakfast next morning,—a trap set for Susy. She would notice his sadness, presently, and say, eagerly

and hopefully, “It has happened, George, I told you it would, and you are served just right—how much did you lose?—I hope ever so much; nothing else can teach you.” George’s sigh would be ready, and also his confession, along with a properly repentant look—

“Yes, Miss Susy, I had hard luck—something was wrong, I can’t make out what it was, but I hope and believe it will learn me. I only won eight hundred dollars.”

The intersection of life above and below stairs is of special interest. Nineteenth-century babies were, in some respects, closer to their servant-class nursemaids than to their mothers. As a result of such close interaction with the nurses, we learn, the infant Clara Clemens felt entitled to add her nurses’ surnames to her own: “As she did it with proper gravity and earnestness, not knowing there was any joke in it, it went very well: ‘Clara Lewis O’Day Botheker McAleer McLaughlin Clemens.’” The last-named nurse, Maria McLaughlin, in Clemens’s retelling, has a stature, and an appetite, that are truly Rabelaisian:

There was never any wet-nurse like that one—the unique, the sublime, the unapproachable! She stood six feet in her stockings, she was perfect in form and contour, raven-haired, dark as an Indian, stately, carrying her head like an empress, she had the martial port and stride of a grenadier, and the pluck and strength of a battalion of them. In professional capacity the cow was a poor thing compared to her, and not even the pump was qualified to take on airs where she was. She was as independent as the flag, she was indifferent to morals and principles, she disdained company, and marched in a procession by herself. She was as healthy as iron, she had the appetite of a crocodile, the stomach of a cellar, and the digestion of a quartz-mill. Scorning the adamant law that a wet-nurse must partake of delicate things only, she devoured anything and everything she could get her hands on, shoveling into her person fiendish combinations of fresh pork, lemon pie, boiled cabbage, ice cream, green apples, pickled tripe, raw turnips, and washing the cargo down with freshets of coffee, tea, brandy, whisky, turpentine, kerosene—anything that was liquid; she smoked pipes, cigars, cigarettes, she whooped like a Pawnee and swore like a demon; and then she would go up stairs loaded as described and perfectly delight the baby with a banquet which ought to have killed it at thirty yards, but which only made it happy and fat and contented and boozy. No child but this one ever had such grand and wholesome service. The giantess raided

my tobacco and cigar department every day; no drinkable thing was safe from her if you turned your back a moment; and in addition to the great quantities of strong liquors which she bought down town every day and consumed, she drank 256 pint bottles of beer in our house in one month, and that month the shortest one of the year. These things sound impossible, but they are facts.

The “Family Sketch” terminates with Clemens’s reminiscence of “Aunt Cord” (Mary Ann Cord), the cook at Quarry Farm. He shapes this as a prologue to his 1874 sketch about her life in slavery and in freedom, “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It,” included in our edition. That sketch has of course been published before, but not in a critically established text. Taking account of all textual witnesses, including obviously the manuscript (at the University of Virginia), has yielded a text free (or more free) from the interference of *Atlantic Monthly* editors, and nearer Clemens’s own finely tuned representation of African American dialect.

The “Family Sketch” by itself is too brief to make a satisfying volume, and the Project is taking the opportunity to publish it alongside two more “private” manuscripts: Susy’s biography of her father (published in 1985 in an unsatisfactory edition by Charles Neider), and Mark Twain’s “Record of the Small Foolishnesses of Susie & ‘Bay’ Clemens (Infants).” As the title indicates, this is a notebook of the kind many families keep, recording the striking or naive sayings of the children. The Clemenses kept this book starting in 1876, when Susy was four and Clara was two. Its value for general readers as well as scholars has been recognized before; parts of it were used in the *Autobiography*, and others have been quoted in biographical studies; but never before has the manuscript (again in the University of Virginia’s magnificent Mark Twain collection) been published in full. I wish to conclude by reproducing an entry from “Small Foolishnesses,” leaving it to stand as an invitation to the “private writings” of Mark Twain in all their glory:

When Bay was 3 years old, Susie was taken down to the town, one day, and was taken with a vomiting when she got back in the evening. Bay, off in the corner in her crib—totally neglected—observed the coddling and attention which Susie was receiving, as long as she could reasonably stand it; then sat up and said grandly and simply: “Well, some time I be dressed up and go down town and come back and throw up, too.”