

*A newfound cache of family letters shows how Mark Twain and his family were comforted by Down East memories — and gifts of rare Maine wildflowers — during his wife's final illness*

## “Be Sure and Save the Gentians”

By Peter Salwen

“**I** HAVE A BOOK that is signed SLC . . .,” the email began.

As the host of a fairly busy Web site devoted to “SLC” — that is, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, aka Mark Twain — I get many such messages. Usually it just means someone has stumbled across an old copy of *Tom Sawyer* or *The Prince and the Pauper* and now expects to make a killing in the rare-book market.

This was different. The writer, a Mrs. Grace C\_\_\_\_, was a cheerful part-time receptionist at the First Baptist Church in Orlando, where her husband runs the lost-and-found at the Disney Animal Kingdom theme park. Her book was *not* by Twain, but it actually had a note in his handwriting on the front endpaper. It had come to her through her mother's family, and for someone like me, who has spent upwards of half a century fascinated by Twain's life and work, her story was more than a little tantalizing.

“Samuel Clemens used to spend a lot of his summers at my mother's uncle Gene Sewall's home in York, Maine,” Mrs. C\_\_\_\_ continued, adding, almost casually, “I also have some brief letters, written by his daughter, to the Sewalls. I was told that Samuel Clemens wrote most of or all of his ‘Mark Twain’ works while sitting on an outside balcony of the Sewell home overlooking York harbor. I am trying to locate someone who can give me any information on the above.”

What she had, in fact, turned out to be a small but very real piece of American literary history: seven letters written in 1902-03 by Mark Twain's youngest daughter, Jean Clemens, and his sister-in-law Susan Crane. Unread for most of the intervening century, the letters don't betray any great secrets or surprises, but they do give a vivid, intimate

picture of the author and his family during what had to be one of the most heartrending passages of their lives.

**I**n 1902, the 66-year-old Mark Twain was the most renowned humorist of his or any country — and much more: a living national treasure whose sage counsel and pungent opinion were sought, as his daughter Clara put it, “on every accident, incident, invention or disease in the world.” To escape the pressures of business and entertaining, and to protect his wife Livy's always-fragile health, the Clemens family decided to spend the summer in York Harbor, Maine. They arrived about the end of June, their friend Henry H. Rogers—John D. Rockefeller's business partner—having made his yacht *Kanawha* available for the trip, and settled down comfortably in The Pines, a wide, low cottage on a bluff overlooking the York River.



Everything augured a happy summer. Twain had spent late May and early June on a triumphal and nostalgic tour through the scenes of his vanished Missouri boyhood. He arrived in Maine full of a new writing project, a lurid tale set in the Missouri of his boyhood, and he “spilt,” as he put it, about 48,000 words of it over the next six weeks.

In order to have a place to work undisturbed, he rented a vacant bedroom across the road in the home of a fisherman and boatman, Grace C\_\_\_\_'s great-grandfather Millard Sewall. There he commandeered a favorite porch rocker where he could write comfortably using a clipboard held on the arm of the chair. This undoubtedly prompted the family legend that he did “most” of his writing there; it also meant the Clemens's servants could truthfully tell unwanted callers their employer was “out.”

Twain's bosom friend, author-editor William Dean Howells, had just purchased a summer home at nearby Kittery Point. He and Twain soon got into the habit of sitting at a corner of the high veranda farthest away from Livy's window, where they could read their manuscripts to each other, swap yarns and “laugh their hearts out without disturbing her.”

Twain finished work on the new book the fourth of August, a Monday. The next day the town of York celebrated its 250th anniversary, and Twain was the featured speaker, and in the evening he and Livy cheerfully joined the throng that turned out for the processions and fireworks display. But just a week later, at dawn August 12th, Livy was jolted awake by a mysterious, suffocating seizure—the onset of what would later prove to be a fatal heart condition.

She survived the episode—barely—but as she started to recover the doctors were adamant that she needed absolute quiet. They and Clara Clemens, the oldest daughter, who had rushed to the scene, urged Mark Twain and Jean to find temporary quarters elsewhere. So the Sewall residence

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became their home for the time being, and there they found not only abundant Down East hospitality during what eventually stretched into ten weeks of agonized waiting, but also a generous supply of much-appreciated support and sympathy.

The letters, written during the eleven months following their stay, mostly discuss everyday things — the train ride home, payment for their room and board, and effusive thanks for a gift of fringed gentians — rare, deep-blue wildflowers that clearly meant a lot to the Clemens family. But they also speak of the warm friendship that sprang up between the two families, and the great sense of comfort the Clemens family drew from the memory of their stay in New England.

It was October 15th before Livy was strong enough to undertake the 9½-hour train ride to New York, where the family were living in a rented mansion above the Hudson River in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. (The house, known as Wave Hill, is now a city-owned cultural center.) The next day, Jean sent Millard Sewall a detailed and wryly humorous account of their trip. Twain had chartered a special “invalid car” for Livy. Even so, the trip was none too easy, and in Jean’s telling it comes near ending in disaster.

“Mother got through the journey better than we hoped,” she writes, “considering the behaviour of her bed, which bounded her into the air whenever the train was in motion. It didn’t make any difference whether she was on the air-bed or the car-mattrass [sic], she was bounded the entire time.

“We reached here a little before seven, somewhat tired but on the whole very comfortable, except [Jean’s maid] Anna who was car-sick and had a headache which gave her the joyful opportunity of making enough fuss for six people dying of consumption. (I am kind, don’t you think so?)”

The near-disaster came when they were nearly home:

“At the station here there came near being a tragedy. Clara had just stepped off our car and Father was following when a lightning express passed between our car and the platform. Some men yelled and the train whistled so that Clara leaped for the platform and Father managed to stay on the car steps. If either of them had been half a minute later or earlier, they would have been killed.”

Everybody managed to reach home intact, and by evening Livy was “a good deal better.” But a few days later Susan Crane had her own brush with a real tragedy when she went downtown to cash a money order. As she describes it in her letter to Grace Sewall, “I went into Wall Street just after the shooting of those three men, the murderer taking his own life.”

Contemporary newspaper accounts identify the gunman as an accused embezzler, one W.C. Turner, lately president of the Climax Bottle Co., who had just concluded an acrimonious meeting with his former business associates by shooting two of them dead, then putting a bullet through his own brain.

“There was great confusion & excitement so that I dreaded to go out onto the street again,” Susan’s letter continues. She is helped safely onto a streetcar, but concludes that Manhattan is “a confused wild place for a country woman.” The incident made her think of “the peace & quiet of the Yorks, which I greatly preferred.”

Meanwhile, up in Riverdale, Jean Clemens was already busy in her “sitting and work room” overlooking the Hudson. It was her father’s habit to leave little sheets of manuscript scattered everywhere. It was Jean’s task, as his assistant, to collect and arrange them and copy them on the typewriter, as well as handle some of the family’s correspondence.

She had just gotten the bill for the family’s stay with the Sewalls, and in her next letter she declares it “unsatisfactory.” “We had two and even three rooms at your home for some time,” she protests, “besides the myriad of things your father did and made for us, of which no account was rendered, just as though he hadn’t done them and in doing those things assisted us in more ways than one. Our complaint is that his kindness and generosity are much too large.”

Her father added a stern note of his own at the foot of the page.

“Miss Sewall, you are not bringing your father up properly,” Mark Twain cautions his recent hostess. “He will go on robbing himself until he will become an abandoned & incurable criminal. Let him beware!—SLC”

Anxiety about Mrs. Clemens’ health shadows almost every letter, of course, but the mere fact “that she could take that journey and live” had given Livy new courage.

“Yes we are very much encouraged in regard to Mrs Clemens,” Susan Crane writes on Nov. 2nd. “She sat up an hour, out of doors on Tuesday and did not suffer from it. No doubt a long time will be required to restore the tired nerves, but I believe it will come to pass, with care.”

But ten days later Jean reports, “For the past twelve days there had been absolutely no improvement in Mother’s condition. Indeed two of her heart attacks were quite as bad or worse than the ones she had at York. Dr. Dana the nerve specialist is partly to blame. He ordered some heart stimulants which had an extremely bad effect. We are tired of experimenting doctors & shall call in NO more consultants.”

By mid-December, though, she could tell Mr. Sewall, “Mother is a good deal better; she has been sleeping much more regularly for the past ten days.”

In fact, Livy was destined to remain bedridden for many more months, and with hindsight Twain would later say that the brief holiday in Maine had marked the end of her social life.

One reliable antidote to anxiety was the family’s memories of Maine. “I would be delighted to be back in York again,” Jean says soon after their return. “I looked at the full moon a few moments ago & wished I was on the river with you once more.”

For Susan, Maine memories offered comfort on sleepless nights. “I often go over the bridge, the ‘float’, and down among the old pine trees, in the darkness of the night, when sleep fails to come,” she tells Grace. “Please look at the pine trees, and the in flowing, and outgoing tide, for me, and remember that my spirit haunts your neighborhood.”

Among their Maine mementoes, Livy and Susan especially prized several gifts of fringed gentians, which are mentioned no fewer than seven times in as many letters.

Nearly extinct today and rare even then, these vivid purple-blue blossoms appear in meadows and on brook banks in late summer or early fall. Their fleeting, exquisite beauty — John Burroughs wrote of their “rare and delicate, almost aristocratic look” — and their habit of opening in direct sun and closing again in the shade, had inspired Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and other 19th-century artists and writers. William Cullen Bryant captured this elegiac mood in one of his best-known poems, “To the Fringed Gentian”:

*Thou waitest late and com'st alone,  
When woods are bare and birds are flown,  
And frosts and shortening days portend  
The aged year is near his end.*

Knowing how Livy and Susan cherished the rare flowers, the whole Sewall family had apparently turned out to collect them. They even gathered hundreds of the tiny seeds along with the flowers, and sent them to Susan for her garden. Susan had also carried a small bunch on to the train and sent them in to her sister “as a good omen”; for her, apparently, Livy’s was “the one dear face I always see in the fringed gentian.”

“As we were picking up to leave the train,” she says, “Mrs Clemens asked Miss Clara to be sure and save the gentians. Seeing her guard the small bunch of flowers, I took charge of them, and in the morning sunshine, in my Riverdale room, they wakened again, and again, with wide open fringes were taken to cheer the invalid, who has somewhat the feeling for them that I have.”

Livy’s illness heightened the many tensions that already beset the family. Mark Twain’s mere presence seemed to agitate his invalid wife dangerously, and on doctors’ orders he was effectively banned from her room; all through that winter the couple communicated mainly via handwritten notes.

Jean was also barred from the sickroom. A spirited, creative, sometimes willful young woman of 22, she had suffered from epilepsy for the past six years, and despite treatments by the best American and European “specialists” she still suffered frequent, debilitating seizures and outbursts of alarming behavior. The family took it as given

that the constant stress and burden of caring for her had been a major cause, most likely the major cause, of Livy’s condition.

This painful topic is of course never mentioned in Jean’s letters to the Sewalls, but it illuminates and adds a wrenching poignancy to several otherwise puzzling passages. At one point, for example, she writes, “Mother was a good deal better yesterday evening,” but then

continues, “I don’t know what sort of a night she had, good I trust.” Elsewhere, when she is about to leave home for several weeks, she says of Livy, “I haven’t seen her yet but on my return I hope to be able to.”

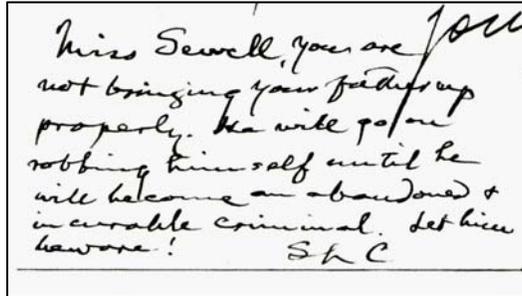
With Livy incapacitated, day-to-day management of the household fell to Clara Clemens, Jean’s older sister.

“Clara is on the verge of a serious illness, I am afraid, caused by nervousness and anxiety,” Jean tells Grace Sewall in mid-November. “I hope she will be able to withstand the strain she is constantly under, but it seems doubtful. Of course being in such a condition physically makes her mental condition very bad & in her anxiety she is constantly building mountains out of mole-hills where Mother’s illness is concerned.”

The strain must have gotten even worse when, two days before Christmas, Jean came down with pneumonia. Clara, who up till then had enjoyed a well-earned reputation for always speaking the “unvarnished truth,” was now handed an extra duty: keeping the truth from Mother.

Sometimes, real-life incidents have a heavy-handed irony beyond what any novelist would dare. That month’s issue of *Harper’s Monthly*, as it happened, featured a story by Mark Twain (“Was It Heaven? Or Hell?”) in which the devoutly pious protagonists, two elderly sisters, risk eternal damnation by lying to protect a critically mother. Now, in a grotesque instance of life imitating art, Clara was doing just that. When Livy would ask about Jean’s comings and goings, Clara would respond with elaborately detailed accounts of fictional dinners, shopping trips and festive outings, while in fact her sister hovered near death in a bedroom nearby. Describing Clara’s performance later, Twain wrote, “She had never told her mother a lie in her life before, and I may almost say that she never told her a truth afterward.”

By the following June Livy was strong enough to travel to Quarry Farm, her sister’s summer home on East Hill overlooking Elmira, New York, their home town. Now the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies, Quarry Farm had been the Clemenses’ favored summer retreat for over thirty years. It was at Quarry Farm (and not, alas, on the Sewalls’ porch at York Harbor) that Twain had actually penned most of *Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and his other immortal works, working in



Miss Sewall, you are ~~not~~  
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have care! S. H. C.

a cozy study that Susan Crane had built for him in 1874 on the hillside above the house.

In the final letter of the series, dated September 28, 1903, Susan describes the summer for Grace Sewall.

“The month of July gave us especial cheer in the steady improvement of the beloved patient,” she says, “but in Aug she took on too many interests & cares & the gain has been more fitful & the slight backsets have been frequent.”

In fact, Twain and Livy would leave for New York in less than a week, en route to Florence, where they had rented a villa for the coming year. The plan was for Livy to regain her health in the sunny Italian climate. Instead, after a brief seeming recovery she died the following June, aged 58.

But for the moment that crushing blow still lay in the future, and Susan’s letter is filled with hope and “pleasant memories.” Livy, she reports, “has almost lived on the big porch, eating & sleeping there, only going in for the night, and for a rest & bath in the afternoon. She walks about the house with more strength, and rides in a wheel chair, propelled by the nurse, or a strong man. This morning she was out two hours, going far up the hill to the woods, where the fire place & wigwam are.”

The old pine trees at Quarry Farm reminded Susan of her room in the Sewalls’ house at York. “Sometimes in the night I almost fancy I am there,” she muses, “and I love to think that you, your father, and mother are there, being kind & considerate to someone else, and allowing your cheerful spirits to brighten other lives, even as you brightened in the summer of 1902 the lives of an entire family.

“Miss Jean is very well this summer,” she adds, “and has been a great comfort to her mother in her tender consideration.”

Also, to Susan’s delight, “another large consignment” of her “beloved gentians” had arrived from Maine. “Each morning I take them in to say good morning to Mrs Clemens, and to the entire household, and the deep blue blossoms give great pleasure. . . . It is truly wonderful that the little things can travel so far, & then open their eyes so wide & bright for many days. In this they are unlike any flower I know.”

Consciously or not, her thought recalls the closing stanzas of Bryant’s poem:

*Then doth thy sweet and quiet eye  
Look through its fringes to the sky,  
Blue—blue—as if that sky let fall  
A flower from its cerulean wall.*

*I would that thus, when I shall see  
The hour of death draw near to me,  
Hope, blossoming within my heart,  
May look to heaven as I depart.*



But death seemed to be far from Susan’s thoughts. Livy, she says, “is usually cheerful, & full of courage for her long trip to Florence, for they hope to sail Oct 24th and go from here to New York on the 5th that she may have the care of the New York Doctor as long as possible.” Happily ignorant of what the future would bring, she concludes, “Thus you will see that we are far in advance of this date last year, and are very thankful & hopeful.”

So Mrs. C\_\_\_\_’s letters bring us to another autumn and the end of that ill-starred year. And if, unfortunately, they dispel the notion that Mark Twain wrote his books on the Sewalls’ balcony, they do make it clear how warmly he and his family valued the Sewalls’ friendship, and that may be even better.

But what about that book, you may wonder, and the inscription by “SLC” inscription that first prompted Mrs. C\_\_\_\_ to contact me?

Well, the volume in question turns out to be a long-forgotten novel, *The Suffering Millions*, by one Rosetta Otwell Cross. It was published privately in 1890, about a dozen years before Twain found it on the Sewalls’ bookshelf. For some reason, I picture him padding through the sleeping cottage, puffing one of his vile cigars (he much preferred what he called “the worst cigar in the New York market”) and hunting for something—anything!—to read. The novel was written, the author tells us, “to help educate and elevate the children of unworthy parents,” and although a strange note on the title page assures us that the volume was “edited by a graduate of the University of Michigan,” it suffers from innumerable typos and grammatical lapses as well as an impenetrably dense and wooden writing style.

*The Suffering Millions* was obviously well-intentioned—no surprise there, if the kindly Sewalls had a copy—but one suspects it was not a shining commercial success. I would lay odds, in fact, that Grace C\_\_\_\_’s copy may well be the only one in existence. But it did have one literary merit: the book inspired America’s greatest humorist to scribble a characteristically pungent assessment of it on the front endpaper, and to do so in language that would make it unmistakably Mark Twain’s even if it were unsigned:

*The trouble about this book, is, that it isn’t bad enough to be good. Every now & then it drops into something resembling English.*

SLC