

A MURDER, A MYSTERY & A MARRIAGE



Mark Twain

CHAPTER 1.

Upon the border of a remote and out-of-the-way village in south-western Missouri lived an old farmer named John Gray. The village was called Deer Lick. It was a straggling, drowsy hamlet of six or seven hundred inhabitants. These people knew, in a dim way, that out in the great world there were things called railways, steamboats, telegraphs and newspapers, but they had no personal acquaintance with them, and took no more interest in them than they did in the concerns of the moon. Their hearts were in hogs and corn. The books used in the primitive village school were more than a generation old; the aged Presbyterian minister, Rev. John Hurley, still dealt in the fire and brimstone of an obsolete theology; the very cut of the people's garments had not changed within the memory of any man.

John Gray, at fifty-five, was exactly as well off as he was when he had inherited his small farm thirty years before. He was able to grub a living out of his land, by hard work; by no amount

of endeavor had he ever been able to do more. He had had ambitions toward wealth, but the hope of acquiring it by the labor of his hands had by slow degrees died within him and he had become at last a blighted, querulous man. He had one chance left, and only one. This was, the possibility of marrying his daughter to a rich man. He observed with content, that an intimacy had sprung up between Mary Gray and young Hugh Gregory; for Hugh, in addition to being good, respectable and diligent, would be left tolerably well off whenever his aged father's days should come to an end. John Gray encouraged the young man, from selfish motives; Mary encouraged him because he was tall, honest, handsome, and simple-hearted, and because she liked curly auburn hair better than any other. Sarah Gray, the mother, encouraged him because Mary liked him. She was willing to do anything that might please Mary, for she lived only in her and for her.

Hugh Gregory was twenty-seven years old, Mary twenty. She was a gentle creature, pure in heart, and beautiful. She was dutiful and obedient, and even her father loved her as much as it was in him to love anything. Presently Hugh began to come daily to see Mary; he and she took long horseback rides when the weather was pleasant, and in the evenings they had cosy confidential chats together in a corner of the parlor while the old people and Mary's youthful brother Tom kept to themselves by the fireplace and took no notice. John Gray's nature was softening fast. He gradually ceased to growl and fret. His hard

face took to itself a satisfied look. He even smiled now and then, in an experimental way.

One stormy winter's night Mrs. Gray came beaming to bed an hour later than her husband, and whispered:

"John, everything's safe at last. Hugh has popped the question!"

John Gray said:

"Say it again, Sally, say it again!"

She said it again.

"I want to get up and hurrah, Sally. It's too good for anything! *Now* what'll Dave say! Dave may go to grass with his money—nobody cares."

"Well, old man, nobody does care. And it's well it's so, because if your brother ever might have left us his money he'll never do it now, because he hates Hugh like p'ison—has hated him ever since he tried to cheat Hugh's father out of the Hickory Flat farm and Hugh chipped in and stopped the thing."

"Don't you worry about any money we've lost of Dave's, Sally. Since the day I quarreled with Dave, twelve years ago, he has hated me more and more all the time and I've hated him more and more. Brothers' quarrels don't heal, easy, old wife. He has gone on getting richer and richer and richer, and I've hated him for that. I'm poor, and he's the richest man in the county—and I hate him for *that*. Much money Dave would be likely to leave to us!"

"Well, you know he used to pet Mary a good deal before you quarreled, and so I thought maybe—"

"Shaw! 'Twas an old bachelor's petting—no money in it for Mary—you can depend on that. And if there might have been, it's all up with it, now, as you say; for he wouldn't give her a cent that Hugh Gregory might ever get hold of."

"Dave's a mean old hunks, anyway you can fix him, pap. I wish there was some other place where Hugh could sleep when he is in the village over night but in the same building with David Gray. Hugh's father has tried to get Dave to move his office out of there, time and time again, but he sticks to his lease. They say he is always at the front door of a morning, ready to insult Hugh when he comes down stairs. Mrs. Sykes told me she heard Dave insult Hugh one morning about six weeks ago, when three or four people were going by. She looked to see Hugh break his head, but he didn't. He kept down his temper, and never said anything but 'Mr. Gray, you might do this thing once too often, one of these days.' Dave sneered at him and said, 'O yes, you've said that before— why don't you *do* something? What do you talk about it so much for?'"

"Well, we'll go to sleep, old woman. I reckon things are going about right with us at last. Here's luck and long life to Hugh and Mary—*our* children— God bless 'em!"

CHAPTER 2.

About eight o'clock the next morning the Rev. John Hurley rode up to John Gray's gate, hitched his horse and ascended the front steps. The family heard him stamping the

snow off his boots, and Mr. Gray delivered a facetious glance at Mary and said:

"Seems to me Hugh comes a little earlier and a little earlier every morning, don't he, honey?"

Mary blushed and her eyes sparkled with a proud pleasure, but these things did not keep her from flying to the door to welcome—the wrong man. When the old clergyman was come into the presence of the family, he said:

"Well, friends, I've got some splendid news for ye!"

"Have you, though?" said John Gray. "Out with it, Dominie, and I'll agree to cap it with better news still, which I'll give *you*."

He cast a teasing glance at Mary, who dropped her head. The old minister said:

"Good—my news first and yours afterward. You know, David Gray has been down on the South Fork for a month, now, looking after his property there. Well the other night he staid at my son's house, there, and in the talk it came out that he made his will about a year ago and in it he leaves every cent of his wealth to—whom do you suppose? Why, to our little Mary here—nobody else! And you can depend on it I didn't lose a minute after reading my son's letter. I rushed right here to tell you—for, says I to myself, this will join those estranged brothers together again, and in the mercy of God my old eyes shall see them at peace and loving each other once more. I have brought you back the lost love of your youth, John Gray—now cap it with better news if you can! Come, tell me your tidings!"

All the animation had passed out of John Gray's face. It was hard, troubled, distraught. One might have supposed he had just heard of a crushing calamity. He fumbled with his garments, he avoided the inquiring eyes that were fixed upon him, he tried to stammer out something, and failed. The situation was becoming embarrassing. To relieve it, Mrs. Gray came to the rescue with—

"Our great news is that our Mary here—"

"Hold your tongue, woman!" shouted John Gray.

The simple mother shrank away, dumb. Mary was confused and silent. Young Tommy Gray retired the back way, as was his custom when his father showed temper. There was nothing to be said; consequently nobody said anything. There was a most awkward silence for a few moments, and then the old clergyman made his way out of the place with as little ease and as little grace as another man might who had got a kick where he looked for a compliment.

John Gray walked the floor for ten minutes rumpling his hair and growling savagely to himself. Then he turned upon his cowed wife and daughter and said:

"Mind you—when Mister Gregory comes for his answer, tell him it is *no!* Do you hear? Tell him it is No. And if you can't muster pluck enough to tell him I'd rather he wouldn't come here any more, leave it to me. I'll tell him."

"O, father, you don't mean to say—"

"Not a word out of you, Mary! I *do* mean to say it. There, now. Just drop the matter."

With that, he flourished out of the house, leaving Mary and her mother in tears and heart broken. It was a brilliant winter morning; the level prairie that stretched abroad from John Gray's house to the horizon, was a smooth white floor of snow. It was just as the storm of the night before had left it—unmarred by track or break of any kind.

John Gray plowed his way through the snow straight out into the prairie, never noting what direction he took, nor caring. All he wanted was room to relieve his mind. His thought ran somewhat after this fashion:

"Just my luck! This thing *would* turn up exactly at the wrong time, of course! But it ain't too late, it ain't too late, yet. Dave shall soon know that there ain't anything in the talk about Mary and Gregory—if he has heard it, but I know he hasn't, else he'd have snatched her out of his will in a minute. No, he shall know that nobody of the tribe of Gregory can have Mary—or look at her, even. One good thing, she'll never say yes to him or any other man till she knows I'm willing. I'll send Mr. Gregory a-tramping, in short order! And I'll mighty soon let everybody know it, too. What's Gregory's money to Dave's! Dave could buy all the Gregorys twenty times over, and have money left. Just let it be spread around that Mary is to have Dave's money and she can take her pick and choice in six counties around. Hello, what's this!"

It was a man. A young man, under thirty, by his looks, dressed in a garb of unfamiliar pattern, and lying at full length in the snow; motionless, he was— evidently insensible. His dress

had a costly look about it, and he had several jewels and trinkets upon his person. Near him lay a heavy fur coat and a couple of blankets, and at a little distance a valise. About him the snow was somewhat tumbled, but everywhere else it was still smooth. John Gray cast his eye around for the horse or the vehicle that had brought the stranger, but nothing of the kind was to be seen. Moreover, there was no track of wheels or horse, or of any man, either, save the tracks he had made himself, in coming from his house. Here was indeed a wonder. How did the stranger get there, more than a quarter of a mile from a road or a house, without breaking the snow, or leaving a track? Had the hurricane blown him thither?

But this was no time to be inquiring into details; something must be done. John Gray put his hand into the stranger's breast; it was still warm. He fell to chafing the chilled temples. He towlsed and tumbled his patient, and rubbed snow on his face. Signs of life began to appear. John Gray's eye fell upon a silver flask that lay in the snow by the blankets. He seized it and poured some of its contents between the stranger's lips. The effect was encouraging; the man stirred a trifle, and heaved a sigh. John Gray continued his efforts; he raised the man to a sitting posture, and presently the closed eyes opened and gazed around with a dazed, lack-lustre expression. Next they dwelt a moment upon John Gray's face and something more of life came into them.

"I wish he'd speak," said Gray to himself. "I've a powerful hankering to know who he is and how he got here. Good—he is going to speak!"

The lips parted, and after an effort or two, these words came forth:

"Ou suis-je?"

The eager expectancy in John Gray's eyes faded out and left his face looking blank enough. He was grievously disappointed.

"What kind of jabber might that be?" said he to himself.

He quickened the stranger's consciousness with another draught from the flask. The handsome foreign eyes peered perplexedly into John Gray's a moment, and then this question followed:

"Wo bin ich?"

John Gray stared stupidly, and shook his head.

"It ain't a Christian," thought he; "maybe it ain't a human. I'd think so if it wasn't for its harness; but—"

"Donde estoy? Dove sono? Gdzie ja jestem?"

A sorely bothered expression spread its blank expanses over John Gray's face, and the stranger perceived, with plainly apparent distress, that once more he had failed to make himself understood. He struggled to raise himself to his feet; he undermined John Gray's already tottering reason with a succession of graceful but complex signs drawn from the deaf and dumb language; then he began to rail at Gray, in a peculiarly barbarous foreign tongue for idling there and looking stupid

when he ought to be bestirring himself and giving all the help he could to an unfortunate stranger. For the first time Gray spoke aloud. Said he:

"By George, he's woke up at last! And he's woke up all over, too. There ain't no doubt about—"

"O, you're English! You're English! Good! Why didn't you say so? Come, bear a hand! Help me up! I'm worth twenty dead men, yet! Pound me, rub me, kick me! Give me brandy!"

The amazed farmer obeyed orders vigorously, under the spur of the stranger's commanding tones, and meantime the patient's tongue ran on, sometimes in one language, sometimes in another. Finally he made a step or two, leaning upon Gray, then stopped and said in English:

"My friend, where am I?"

"Where are you? Why you're in my prairie. You're in the edge of Deer Lick. Where did you think you was?"

"Prairie? Deer Lick?" said the stranger, musingly. "I don't know these. What *country* am I in?"

"What *country*? Why, dern it all, you ain't in *any* country. You're in Missouri. And it's the banner State of America, I reckon."

The stranger put his hands impressively upon John Gray's shoulders, held him at arms' length a moment, looked him steadily in the eyes, then nodded his head two or three times, as if satisfied. An hour later he was in bed at John Gray's house, tossing to and fro in a restless sleep, burning up with a fever, and murmuring brokenly, and ceaselessly, in nearly all languages but

English. Mary, her mother, and the village doctor, were working over him faithfully.

CHAPTER 3.
[To be continued...]