



New York Times file

After rejecting in 1876 Mark Twain's request for a contest that would produce different endings for

his tale *A Murder, a Mystery and a Marriage*, the Atlantic Monthly has had a change of heart.

## A novel wish

Magazine contest will let writers finish Twain story

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WASHINGTON — Just over 125 years after Mark Twain wrote it, a novelette titled *A Murder, a Mystery and a Marriage* is to appear in the Atlantic Monthly magazine, much as he originally intended.

And just as the author of *Huckleberry Finn* had hoped, the novelette's publication is part of a literary competition that urges would-be collaborators to write their own endings to the story, Atlantic Editor Michael Kelly said in a telephone interview.

The first two chapters and contest rules are available online at [www.buffalolib.org/TwainCompetition/Twain.html](http://www.buffalolib.org/TwainCompetition/Twain.html). The deadline is Monday, when the Atlantic's full 8,000-word version of the Twain novelette will be on newsstands.

The two-chapter glimpse of the tale, set in Deer Lick, Mo., is typical Twain: There are feuding brothers, a pair of young lovers and a mysterious polyglot stranger who seems to have dropped from the sky into the snows of the American prairie.

"It was a straggling, drowsy hamlet of six or seven hundred inhabitants," the novelette says of Deer Lick. "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."

Twain never saw the story in print during his life, but had pitched it to the Atlantic in March 1876 as part of a literary publicity stunt, Kelly said Wednesday.

After the success of his novels *Innocents Abroad* and *Tom Sawyer*, Twain was bogged down in the middle of writing *Huckleberry Finn* when he offered to craft a "skeleton" plot and then have some of the Atlantic's best writers write their own fleshed-out versions, Kelly said from his office in Boston.

This was called a "blindfold novelette" because none of the authors would know what another had written until they were all published, along with Twain's.

Twain dashed off his version in two days in April 1876, and crowed about it in a letter to the Atlantic's editor, William Dean Howells: "Mrs. Clemens (Twain's wife) says my version of the blindfold novelette . . . is 'good.' Pretty strong language — for her. However (her remark) is not original. God said the same of another Creation."

But no one in the Atlantic's high-toned literary stable at the time — which included Henry James, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Bret Harte — would take the

bait, Kelly said.

Kelly gave the story a mixed review for literary content, saying it was clearly written as a crowd pleaser but that the mystery component was stronger than the love story. However, Kelly said the novelette's importance lies in its place in the development of Twain as a great novelist.

"You see Twain wrestling with the dark side. The people in Deer Lick, Missouri, especially the central character, are ignorant, small-minded, suspicious, bigoted people," said Kelly.

After Twain's death in 1910, the typed manuscript was not among his papers, and only surfaced again in 1930 in the estate of London bookseller James Brentano Clemens (no relation to Twain, whose real name was Samuel Clemens).

It passed eventually to Frederick Dannay and Manfred Lee, who wrote mysteries together under the pen name Ellery Queen. The manuscript came to rest at the University of Texas in Austin, home of the Ellery Queen collection.

It came to the Atlantic's attention last year, when an attorney for the Buffalo and Erie County Library in New York, which has an important collection of Twain material, sought to have the novelette published and revived the idea of a literary contest.