



## The Strange Death of Mr. Edgar A. Poe

*"In that which I now propose, we will discard the interior points of this tragedy, and concentrate our attention upon its outskirts. Not the least usual error in investigations such as this is the limiting of inquiry to the immediate, with total disregard of the collateral or circumstantial events. It is the malpractice of the courts to confine evidence and discussion to the bounds of apparent relevancy. Yet experience has shown, and a true philosophy will always show, that a vast, perhaps the larger, portion of truth arises from the seemingly irrelevant."*

-- C. Auguste Dupin, in "The Mystery of Marie Roget," by Edgar Allan Poe

It's one of the cheap ironies of history that literary history is especially full of cheap ironies. The man who invented the detective story, Edgar Allan Poe, died of unknown causes in the city of his birth after almost completely disappearing from human sight for a week. When you combine the evocative power of Poe with the dangerous romance of antebellum America, stir in fiendish conspiracies and Missing Time, you hardly need laudanum to conjure up horrific visions indeed. Drink deep with me, then, of this heady cocktail, of the mysterious death of Edgar Allan Poe.

*"We regret to learn that Edgar A. Poe, the distinguished American poet, scholar and critic, died in this city yesterday morning, after an illness of four or five days. This announcement, coming so sudden and unexpected, will cause poignant regret among all who admire genius, and have sympathies for the frailties too often attending it."*

-- death-notice of Edgar Allan Poe, *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 8, 1849

On September 26, 1849, the forty year old Edgar A. Poe, the most famous literary figure in America, bid farewell to his childhood sweetheart Elmira Shelton in Richmond, Virginia. His plan was to take a steamer to Baltimore, then transfer to the train to Philadelphia. He would spend one or two days in Philadelphia performing a discreetly lucrative ghostwriting assignment, then move on to New York, where he would collect his belongings and his mother-in-law Mrs. Clemm. Poe would then return to Richmond in triumph to marry the wealthy widow Shelton, and relaunch his career and American letters. That, at least, was the intention. Where, exactly, he departed from the plan may never be known; Poe reappears in the world of eyewitness documentation in Baltimore on October 3, apparently sunk deep in inebriated stupor and wearing shabby clothing obviously not his own. One Joseph Walker discovered Poe in Ryan's Tavern, and sent a note to Poe's friend Snodgrass summoning him to the scene. Snodgrass, and a cousin of Poe's named Herring, took him to the hospital. Poe raved in delirium, and when briefly lucid was unable (or unwilling) to say where he had been, or what had become of his clothing and luggage. He died on October 7, 1849, with the medical verdict being exposure compounded by alcoholic poisoning. No autopsy was performed, and he was buried the next day in Baltimore.

Poe was not, as it turns out, a consistent alcoholic, being subject only to widely-separated (though devastating) binges. He had, in fact, recently joined the Temperance Society in Richmond, and later testimony (contradicting immediate reports) denied that he smelled of alcohol at all. Partially as a reaction to the jealous slanders of one Rufus Griswold, who painted Poe as a drooling drunkard and drug-fiend, Poe's latter-day defenders attempt to discern other causes for his death.

Theorists have postulated a weak heart, epilepsy, diabetic coma, severe hypoglycemia, toxic shock syndrome, cerebral meningitis, and most recently, rabies.

*"Poe's condition could easily have been the result of intracerebral trauma, and his lucid interval, if Moran's story can be relied upon, would even lend support to the diagnosis of epidural hematoma."*

-- John F. Courtney, "Addiction and Edgar Allan Poe," *Resident and Staff Physician* (Jan, 1971)

At least one physician has determined (well after the fact) that a cerebral hemorrhage could account for Poe's symptoms, assuming for the moment that the contemporary testimony of Poe's "reek of alcohol" is ignored. In 1872, editor R.H. Stoddard combined the two theses, postulating (on rather circumstantial evidence) that Poe had been kidnapped off the street and imprisoned ("cooped") by political-party thugs, who had plied him with whiskey and drugs to commit vote fraud. After squiring him around to "eleven separate" balloting places, they abandoned him at Ryan's Tavern (the fourth-ward polling place) to die. Although this practice was common in nineteenth-century urban America, and although October 3 was the date of a state-house election, further research in the papers indicates that there was almost no "cooping" reported from Baltimore that year. In *Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, John Evangelist Walsh theorizes (based more soundly on allusive hints and rumors in contemporary letters) that Elmira Shelton's brothers, staunchly opposed to their sister's marriage to the alcoholic, womanizing, generally depraved, and (most importantly) impoverished Edgar Poe, set upon him in Baltimore and either beat him up or forced whiskey upon him, counting on Poe's own debauched behavior to either finish the job or humiliate him so publicly that the engagement would be cancelled.

*"He laughed and threw the bottle up-wards with a gesticulation I did not understand. I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement -- a grotesque one. 'You do not comprehend?' he said. 'Not I,' I replied. 'Then you are not of the brotherhood.' 'How?' 'You are not of the masons.' 'Yes, yes,' I said, 'yes! yes.' 'You? Impossible! A mason?' 'A mason,' I replied. 'A sign,' he said. 'It is this,' I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my roquelaire. 'You jest,' he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. 'But let us proceed to the Amontillado.'"*

-- Edgar Allan Poe, "A Cask of Amontillado"

Certain other details give credence to Walsh's theories. Either in July or late September of 1849, Poe burst in upon his friend, the Philadelphia engraver John Sartain, in (as his 1877 biographer William Gill records) "dread of some fearful conspiracy against his life." Poe's first words to Sartain are evocative, and beautifully vague: "Mr. Sartain, I have come to you for protection and a refuge. It will be difficult for you to believe what I have to tell -- that such things could be in this nineteenth century. It is necessary that I remain concealed for a time." According to Sartain's somewhat confused later testimony, while on the train to New York Poe overheard (thanks to his "marvelous powers of hearing"-- shades of Roderick Usher!) a trio of villains plotting to kill him. He eluded them at Bordentown, New Jersey, and with the help of Sartain (and apparently another friend, the author George Lippard) he laid low and left Philadelphia in disguise after clipping off his mustache.

The "three conspirators" combined with the rumored allusions to "brothers" who sought revenge on Poe can be spun in a widening gyre by the properly Illuminated GM. Poe was a dedicated anti-Mason, openly incorporating savage parody of their rituals and secrecies in such stories as "A Cask of Amontillado," "The Devil in the Belfry," and "Never Bet the Devil Your Head." (Satanist Freemasons, one imagines, would be doubly irritated by the latter two of these.) In the latter story, a man is beheaded under a covered bridge, sparking echoes from the Masonic-Templar Baphomet and the bridge-symbolism so prevalent in some Scotch Rite degrees. (Interestingly, a bizarrely runaway train smashed his gravestone while it was still in the stonemason's yard.) Could Poe's other stories, of codes, and robed inquisitors, and bizarre lineages, and fiendish murder have also hidden references to some arch-conspiratorial plot of black magicians in antebellum New York? (Marc Olsen uses this theory to lurid ends in his shocker novel *Poe Must Die*.) What secrets had the investigative journalist and father of detective fiction uncovered that They would kill to

protect?

*"When I returned I found him in a violent delirium, resisting the efforts of two nurses to keep him in bed. This state continued until Saturday evening (he was admitted on Wednesday) when he commenced calling for one 'Reynolds,' which he did through the night up to three on Sunday morning."*

-- letter of Poe's attending physician, Dr. John J. Moran, to Mrs. Clemm, Nov. 15, 1849

In 1885, one George Rollins came forward to identify himself as the train conductor on Poe's final rail voyage from Philadelphia to Baltimore. He describes the figures shadowing Poe (apparently Sartain's help had only temporarily distracted them), saying they looked like "sharks." What if, rather than colorful nineteenth-century metaphor, Rollins' description were the literal truth? Would Poe's literary heir (who, like Poe, received detailed inspiration from dreams) H.P. Lovecraft have recognized them as akin to the Deep Ones of Innsmouth? Would this explain why Joseph Walker, whose peculiarly reticent and tentative note almost saved Poe's life, was found drowned in Baltimore's Spring Gardens, despite being a good swimmer? Would it, somehow, connect to the mysterious figures who appeared to Poe during his July incarceration in Philadelphia's Moyamensing Prison; a radiant woman in white and a "cauldron of boiling liquid"? What Dark Grail did Poe sip from to send him nearly to suicide upon his release?

In this connection, his final call for "Reynolds" takes on added interest: Poe knew, as far as can be told, nobody named Reynolds -- but maintained a compelling interest in the journalism of one Jeremiah Reynolds, whose incessant campaigns on behalf of the Hollow Earth sparked the Wilkes Antarctic Expedition in 1838. In fact, Reynolds' work became a model for "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," in which an Antarctic Expedition meets an unnamed doom at the hands of a mysterious white figure. During his last week, had Poe managed to communicate with Reynolds and discover the ultimate truth behind the conspiracy, a truth that led to the deep, dark waters of the Antarctic Ocean? Between Elder technology and GM intervention, Poe's last week could have taken months of extra-temporal experience on the astral plane or in the misty realms of sub-history. After seeing the edge of the gulf for himself, perhaps using opium or some rarer substance, did he revisit the Lady of the Cauldron for guidance? Did he die, perhaps raving "Tekeli-li!" in seeming delirium, to preserve a secret Man Was Not Meant to Ratiocinate? Only the Antarctic Rite Mason Shark-People (and of course the GM) know for sure.

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