

The CWA Debut Dagger 2006

Imp

BEING THE LOST NOTEBOOKS OF RUFUS WILMOT GRISWOLD IN THE MATTER OF THE DEATH OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

From the Editor:

Edgar Allen Poe left Richmond, Virginia, on September 27th of 1849, bound via steamship for Baltimore, where he was to catch a train north to Philadelphia and then on to New York City. He never arrived at his final destination. Found shabbily dressed and incoherent in a Baltimore gutter on October 3rd, he was taken to the city's Washington College Hospital, where he died, still delirious, on October 7th. Nothing whatsoever was known of his activities in the period from his boarding of the boat in Richmond until his discovery nearly a week later. Those six missing days have remained one of the most intriguing of all the unsolved mysteries in literary history.

In September of 2005, a musty, leather folio was located at the bottom of a misplaced carton stacked in the archives of the University of Iowa's Poe collection. This folio, misplaced among the papers of noted Poe scholar Thomas Mabbot, contained several handwritten journals, signed and dated by Mr. Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1815-1857), Poe's literary executor.

These are the contents of those journals: A complete telling of the facts related to the last, lost week in the life and death of Edgar Allan Poe.

1.

July 12, 1857

– A Note for the Reader –

There are certain areas of study that tempt our intellects, but which are too entirely spiritually dangerous for the wise man to pursue. Thus, I have kept this story as the closest of secrets. Only now, as my death approaches, do I surrender this manuscript into other hands – scholarly hands, trusting that care will be taken to shield it from the unprepared eye.

My soul's course has long been set, and I pray God will forgive me for loosing this truth on any unsuspecting soul. I ask only that those who examine my words understand that all the depravity, horror, and perversity contained in this telling are meant as a caution and a warning. If there is terror and damnation, let it be known that the evil contained here is always to be judged as, in essence, a dark reflection of divine light.

It was neither my intention nor my desire to be witness to the black events of that week in Baltimore. My friend's condition compelled me to keep all these matters confidential. As a friend I have kept to this course – until now. I pray he will forgive me this need, for it is just that. As I feel death approach, I am compelled to let loose this weight that has become an anchor chained to my immortal spirit. I must break those links.

This is the truth of the burdensome decision that I made that terrible day with the smell of burnt flesh in my nose. I pledged myself to keep all of these tragic events beyond the reach of coarse intellects. I swore that I would never reveal this chronicle of a damned society, a fallen world, a waking nightmare that even now, years later, I still scarce believe happened in reality.

So I implore your forgiveness for the crude, even shocking nature of this narrative. Stop now if your nature is delicate or your spiritual condition is unsteady. The dead and the undead -- the murdered and the dismembered – the smell of opium and the stench of alcohol – all of these degradations and hellish tragedies that plague the underbelly of our civilization await you. I will endeavor to relate the case dispassionately. If I lose sight of the ultimate order of God's creation and His unknown purposes, know that I, too, was scarred by these occurrences. Murder echoes through a man's life. I am, in the end, as base as any man, and prone to self-justifications.

Finally, I beg for the blessing of my poor friend, who has passed from this plane into eternity. I undertook to deflect all from the nature of these, his final days. I marked him with one sin in order to distract those who would destroy his legacy should they discover the true nature of the circumstances that surrounded his death.

Now, with his immortality assured and my decline into obscurity ordained, I remove these pages from the safe where I have kept them these last eight years. I consign them to you and your interested associates. Judge for yourself if he is to be condemned or celebrated. Weigh the factors of the case and decide.

This is the truth of it -- the disturbing events of that week in Baltimore – and the death of my friend, Edgar Allan Poe, as told by his final companion, his literary executor, his failed assassin, myself –

– Rufus W. Griswold

Editor's Note:

The following letter was found loosely inserted into Griswold's portfolio. It is handwritten in what accredited experts verify is surely the hand of Edgar Allan Poe. The conservator has been unable to ascertain the exact date the note was posted as a result of the condition of the document. Written on inexpensive rag-paper, the letter has numerous folds and creases, perhaps as a result of being crumpled by a human hand and tossed aside. There are light brown stains and discolorations of indeterminate origin. In addition, one corner of the sheet is burnt, as if the recipient or other parties unknown began to burn the missive.

A Letter

Richmond, Virginia
September ?, [1849]

Dear Griswold,

I have given this note to Mr. L. who has pledged to see that it reaches you with dispatch. Some disturbing events have occurred that I feel require your personal attention. Having made some recent discoveries, which I think would be unwise to elaborate upon here in an uncertain post, I propose that we meet in a week's time at Baltimore. I must impress upon you with all urgency that these latest occurrences, which have placed my life in danger, and these newly uncovered facts, which threaten your reputation, make such a rendezvous absolutely imperative. In addition, I have ascertained the whereabouts of a certain "Preacher" and hope to gather more information within the next few hours. Ever in mind of the disdain that you have for me personally and the unpleasant prospect such a journey may be to your sensibilities, I must insist that you do not dismiss my request without consideration. I shall arrive in Maryland on the 28th, or such at this date is my intention. Do not fail me. For in God's name I know, Sir. I know what the sepulcher contained.

Truly Yours,
Edgar A. Poe

3.

September 24, 1849

11:00 p.m.

– An Innate and Primitive Principle of Human Action –

I dreamt of death.

Perhaps it was the dessert or the dyspeptic truffle I had consumed before bed. The sugars and the earths that insinuated themselves into my eager tongue, mixed with the oak of the brandy, produced some primitive brew that mimicked the excitement of a sow's nose in the woods. I cannot say with any certainty that I, or any man, can understand the origins of such terrors of sleep. I only know that the torte was over-rich, that a silver fork brought the fertile truffle to my lips, and that the second snifter of Armagnac brought me, disquieted and alone, to my bed. I only theorize that thus stimulated, my tumescent imagination fed by the potion led me to the crypt.

I was suffocating. There was no air in my tomb. Pushing and clawing in desperation, I struggled to find some escape from the cold marble sarcophagus that surrounded me. All was darkness as I found no purchase, no lever, no release – only paralysis and impotence against the weight above me,

I felt my soul slipping away from me. I saw a dragon uncurling, newborn, from a golden egg in front of my eyes, and my earthly vision faded to nothingness in the glory of the release.

Then it seemed to me in my wonder that I became the dragon, and my corruptible body was left behind. I flowed through stone and soil to the dream world above – a moment of freedom in the imagined air of life... a sudden moment... a space where a single heartbeat might have fit. How long is a dream? How many nights dance in a single blink of the drunken eye?

A raven flew through the air and transformed into a man. Dressed in black, he ran from some unseen danger. A blow from the shadows, and his neck snapped. A man bound in chains rushed to his side, and kneeling over the broken body, touched it with a single finger. The raven-man arose, alive again. I recognized his amazed face.

“Poe?” I said.

“Yes,” he replied, in his careful voice.

“You are alive?”

“As any man may be in a dream.”

I heard a scream in the distance – and another, closer – approaching.

“Help me,” I begged him. “She pursues me.”

“No. You are wrong. She pursues me.” Poe's face was grim. “And you have led her here.”

There was yet another scream, as if a sword of pure lightning had torn heaven itself. A naked girl with olive skin materialized in the flash. In her smooth young hands she held a long, golden needle.

“Save me.” Poe said. There was no emotion in his words. They were dead. “Save me,” he said again.

When I awoke, the rain was driving against my window with force. There was an autumn storm over Manhattan. The panes of glass chattered with each gust. My breathing matched the raggedness of the wind. I dismissed the dream. As I said, perhaps it was just the dyspeptic truffle.

God's prophets are all long dead.

September 28, 1849

1:30 p.m.

– **The Avenues to Death are Numerous and Strange** –

There are a thousand paths that lead to death. In fact, it is undeniable that every small step a man takes leads inexorably towards that unavoidable ending. We might endeavor to delay that destiny by prudence and caution. We might be sustained against fatal fortune with the intercession of He who rules the universe. Even then, though He may grant us respite from our fate, even the Almighty cannot give full pardon. The law is immutable. The grave awaits, and even the saints must plunge into that abyss. Still, it is certain that there are choices made, turns taken, that hasten that appointment.

How many ill-guided decisions did I make that week in Baltimore? No doubt there were many. Had I stayed in New York, ignoring the summons, would the ending have been less tragic?

Whatever the curiosities of fate, I stood there on the Lee Street Wharf of Baltimore. The ramshackle construction creaked its way out over shallow water and mud with the pilings and the warped planks running parallel to the street. Traffic was building in the early afternoon as the steamer, Pocahontas, was already hours overdue from Richmond when it finally moored. Low clouds bubbled over the three and four story frame and brick buildings on the waterfront. The air was thick with the smells of dead fish, live pigs, the stench of human sweat, and the noisome miasma of a crowd's breath by the time the last lines were secured. I attempted to stay back – unnoticed – away from the push and shove of the mob.

The first person off the steamer was wrapped in a canvas shroud and carried down the gangplank by four ill-colored crewmen. Anxious to get the corpse off the steamer, they moved quickly. Judging from their efforts, for they bore it as a trifle between them, their burden was light. There was a soft thud as, without ceremony, the men dropped the pallet no more than six steps from the bottom of the way.

The crowd on the dock had stepped back to let the men deposit the sad package. One man even momentarily removed his hat. But when the sailors turned and retraced their steps up the way and back onto the ship, the people closed in again at the foot of the plank. Death was just one more piece of baggage on the wharf. The scudding clouds chose that moment to release their rain.

I scanned the faces of the passengers as they began to disembark. A woman in a soiled bonnet, carrying one child with two other coughing children at her skirts, hurried down and away from the mooring. Two or three gentlemen of moderate means, judging from their hats and vests, hurried along behind her clutching their valises. Then a group of laborers, white men of course, wearing dungarees and plain-stitched shirts under long mud-splattered greatcoats, scurried off the boat pulling up their collars and adjusting the brims of their ill sorted, wide-brimmed hats as it began to rain. A few chattering Negro men scampered off the ship's stern down the quay.

Stepping back under the shelter of a tattered sail awning set near the wharf master's shed, I watched the remainder of the steamer's patrons descend into the thinning crowd. An old man with a hacking cough, then two hooded women – just a hint of them there, then gone, one in white the other in black, their faces obscured – a man with an injured arm – all moved with dispatch, eager to be off the smoke-stained ship and out of the soaking rain. I observed the reunions, handshakes, and a shouted greeting or two as the people made brief salutations and scurried off down the short dock and into the city. There was no sign of Poe.

I stood there under the rude awning as water streamed off the canvas over my head, splashing off the pavement onto my dull boots. I cursed my weakness. I had journeyed from New York to

Baltimore on a fool's errand. There was no Poe aboard.

At that moment, a lone figure emerged from the cabin door aboard the steamer. Dark against the peeling white paint of the boat, he moved through the rain slowly, like a final tendril of smoke from a banked firebox. He wore a faded black coat and a cravat, filthy but precisely tied in the current fashion. There was the air of an ecclesiastic about him as he moved to the gangway and on towards me.

"Poe!" I shouted.

He looked up, and I realized my mistake. The man was too tall, his trouser legs too short, the sleeves of his jacket of a length for a shorter man. He wore green-tinted spectacles with side glasses. He stopped at the bottom of the gangway and stared at me. I felt my tongue frozen as if by a spell. All time seemed in abeyance, even the sound of the cold rain faded. His skin was pale. I remember well the whiteness of his skin, like fog stretched over bone.

"Poe?" His voice was soft yet clear over the staccato rhythm of the rain. It carried strangely.

For a moment I was unable to answer him. My eyes broke from his, and I noticed his shoes. Though he was dressed in old but fastidiously repaired clothing of an earlier year's fashion, his shoes were of the finest quality, shiny and black, with brilliant large gold buckles. They spoke of wealth and taste.

"Do you seek Poe?" The man walked towards me. Looking up, I saw that his hair was very long and pulled into a long Chinese style braid that ran behind his left ear, then out of sight down his back. There was a feeling of wrongness, ill defined, yet pervasive. As he drew closer, I caught the scent of tar about him. Yet his face assumed an expression that could only be defined as humble and familiar. His hands were clasped around a leather-bound book with clasps of steel. In my mute state, I read the title of the book gilded on its spine, "Rituel Catholique."

"Poe?" He stood within three feet of me, directly under the runoff of the rain streaming off the wharf master's tent. He gave no notice to the water splashing off his tall hat and cascading off the brim onto the shoulders of his careworn coat. "Poe? Sir, do you seek Poe?"

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. "Yes... Edgar Poe... Have you news of him? I expected him to be on this boat."

"And you are his friend?" The man's voice, at that moment, was so sweet in my ears. There was such an element of care and concern. Only on reflection at this later date do I associate the sensation of his speech with an overpowering perfume or a too thick, oppressively sweet flavor on the tongue.

"Yes, I am Poe's friend."

"Interesting. A friend." There was a hint of surprise in his words. "I am Fox... Mr. Rennelle Fox." He offered his hand.

Taking his hand lightly, for it seemed fragile and wet in my grasp, I replied, "Pleased. I am Rufus Griswold."

"Ah, Griswold, the editor. A literary man."

"You are familiar with...?"

"Your work in the world of letters? But of course, Mr. Griswold. All who treasure poetry and fine literature admire your keen sense of quality, the breadth of your influence." Fox's grip on my hand tightened, and he pulled me ever so slightly towards him. His eyes became visible behind the spectacles at such closeness. He did not blink, and the pupils were bright, some indeterminate color... or absence of color. "Your reputation is of the highest standing, Mr. Griswold." His intense gaze captured me.

Repelled and attracted, I felt some sense of the forbidden in the coldness of his hands touching mine.... a stirring in me long denied. "Mr. Fox, you flatter me." I struggled with a pleasure that I had not felt in some time.

Of a sudden he withdrew his hand and with a small cold smile spoke. "Yes, I do flatter you."

"Sir?" Something had faded away. I found myself taking a deep breath and wondering that I had not been breathing.

"You seek Poe, Mr. Griswold?" The rain had lessened without my noticing. Fox's voice had lost its humility. There was a chill in the air and in the timbre of his words. "Why do you seek him?"

The rain stopped in that very moment. As if some command had been given. There was a silence. The man's question hung in the stillness. A breeze stirred.

I spoke. "Some business, we have some business." I looked away from his eyes. The flesh on my hand where he had touched me prickled with some strange heat.

"Well, business must be honored." Fox almost laughed – a powdery laugh in his throat that only half-emerged, then was sucked like dust back into Fox's throat. "You seek Poe?"

"Yes, as I said." I had backed away from the man, further under the awning. The air on the wharf had grown heavy, and a frigid fog began to drift up from the fetid waters of the Patapsco basin, leaking through the crude planks of the wharf at our feet.

"A shame." Fox turned and started away. "A shame," he repeated.

"I beg your pardon, sir. A shame?" I called after him as he headed up Lee Street towards the city's bustling chaos. He was met by two women and a servant, their faces shielded from me by their umbrellas. One of the ladies was dressed all in white, the other in the deepest black. I stumbled over my words for a moment as some vague intuition flitted across my consciousness. I dismissed it and called after the man, repeating, "A shame, sir?"

Fox did not reply. He only gestured -- a half point of one arm holding out the "Rituel Catholique." The steel-clasped book indicated a pathetic, shrouded bundle dumped at the bottom of the now empty steamer gangway.

I remembered the crewmen carrying that sad baggage off the boat. "Poe!" I cried out, though I knew there would be no answer and hurried across the wharf towards the abandoned pallet and its light, soulless burden.

"Poe!"

– end of excerpt –

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