

The Facts of Poe's Death and Burial

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THE FACTS OF POE'S DEATH AND BURIAL.

[THE following communication from a gentleman fully cognizant of what he writes, we give, not only because of its intrinsic though most painful interest, but for the further reason that it seems to us necessary in order for ever to settle the controversy in regard to the manner of the poet's death, and the circumstances attending his burial. The article in our magazine, to which it refers, was from the pen of Mrs. E. Oakes Smith, whose memories of Poe were those of a friend, and who wrote of him as one who revered his genius; yet we are sure, knowing her desire to be correct in statements of fact, the lady wrote what were not only her own impressions regarding his death, but also expressed the impressions and feelings of many friends of Poe, who question the truth of Dr. Griswold's "Memoir," in many of its essential features.]

IN BEADLE'S MONTHLY, for February, I find some statements respecting the cause and manner of the death of Edgar Allan Poe, and, as a possessor of the facts of the case, I feel it to be due to the truth of history that I should narrate them.

The first statement to which I refer is in these words:

"It is asserted in the American Cyclopaedia that Edgar Poe died in consequence of a drunken debauch. This is not true."

I regret to say, with due respect to the author of this assertion, and at the same time to the memory of one who was my personal friend, that it is, alas! too true. The facts of the case are simply these: On Tuesday, November 1, 1849, a wet and chilly day, I received a note bearing a signature which I recognized as that of a printer, named Walker, who had set type for the Baltimore Saturday Visiter while I was editing it, and thus became aware of my deep interest in Mr. Poe. It stated that a man claiming Poe's name, and to be acquainted with me, was at Cooth & Sergeant's tavern in Lombard street, near High street, (Baltimore), in a state of beastly intoxication and evident destitution, and that he had been heard to utter my name as that of an acquaintance.

I immediately repaired to the drinking-saloon — for such it was, although dignified by the designation of tavern — and, sure enough, there was Edgar Allan Poe, in a condition which had been but too faithfully described by Mr. Walker. He was in the bar-room, sitting in an arm-chair, with his head dropped forward, so stupefied by liquor and so altered from the

neatly-dressed and vivacious gentleman which he was when I last had the pleasure of a call from him, that, unaided, I should not have distinguished him from the crowd of less-intoxicated men, whom the occasion of an election had called together at the tavern, as the voting-place of the ward in which it was located.

Knowing from observation on a former occasion, when he presented himself at my editorial rooms while intoxicated, that the [Printed page 284] strain of his conversation would be neither agreeable to me nor creditable to my unfortunate friend, if able to converse at all, and considering the company of unsympathetic tipplers who stared at me as I entered their Bacchanalian haunt, I thought it best not to attempt to arouse him from his stupidity. Instead of so doing, I at once ordered a room for him. I had already accompanied a waiter up-stairs, with a view to selecting a sufficiently retired apartment, and had done so, and was returning to the bar-room for the purpose of having the evidently undesired guest conveyed to his allotted chamber, when I was met, at the head of the stairway, by Mr. H—, a relative of Mr. Poe's by marriage. He suggested a hospital as a better place for him than the tavern.

I admitted the correctness of this suggestion. But, some remark of mine having caused his relative to explain why he had not suggested a still better place — his own dwelling — he stated the reason to be, that Mr. Poe had "so frequently abused his hospitality by the rudeness as well as vulgarity of his bearing while drunk, toward the ladies of his household," that he "couldn't think, for a moment, of taking him to his house in his present besotted condition."

For a moment, I confess, I felt resentful toward his friend; but I subsequently became satisfied that he was justified in the course he pursued. The Washington College Hospital having been fixed upon, a messenger was dispatched to procure a carriage. While awaiting its arrival, I had an opportunity to observe, more closely than I had taken time to do previously, the condition and apparel of the strangely metamorphosed being in the bar-room, who wore a name which was a synonym for genius—the first glance at whose tout ensemble was well calculated to recall Poe's own so-frequently hinted doctrine of the metempsychosis. His face was haggard, not to say bloated, and unwashed, his hair unkempt, and his whole physique repulsive. His expansive forehead, with its wonderful breadth between the points where the phrenologists locate the organ of ideality — the widest I ever measured — and that full-orbed and mellow, yet soulful eye, for which he was so noticeable when himself, now lusterless and vacant, as shortly I could see, were shaded from view by a rusty, almost brimless, tattered and ribbon less palmleaf hat. His clothing consisted of a sack-coat of thin and sleezy black alpaca, ripped more or less at several of its seams, and faded and soiled, and pants of a steel-mixed pattern of cassinette, half-worn and badly-fitting, if they could be said to fit at all. He wore neither vest nor neck-cloth, while the bosom of his shirt was both crumpled and badly soiled. On his feet were boots of coarse material, and giving no sign of having been blacked for a long time, if at all.

The carriage having arrived, we tried to get the object of our care upon his feet, so that he might the more easily be taken to it. But he was past locomotion. We therefore carried him to the coach as if he were a corpse, and lifted him into it in the same manner. While we were doing this, what was left of one of the most remarkable embodiments of genius the world has produced in all the centuries of its history — the author of a single poem, which alone has been adjudged by more than one critic as entitling its producer to a lasting and enviable fame was so utterly voiceless as to be capable of only muttering some scarcely — intelligible oaths, and other forms of imprecation, upon those who were trying to rescue him from destitution and disgrace.

The carriage was driven directly to the hospital, where its unconscious occupant was assigned to the care of its intelligent and kindly resident physician. Of the numerous and strangely contradictory memoirs of Mr. Poe that I have preserved, there lies one before me, which states that "insanity ensued, and that next morning he died, a miserable, raving maniac." As to time, this is not true. He lived nearly a week, instead of dying "next day" as one account has it, or "in a few hours" as another records it, dying on the 7th of the same month — Monday. Besides it might convey the idea that he had no lucid moments. But he had, and in one of these an incident transpired which, while its mention may serve to extend the already long as well as interesting record of the last words of noted men, it will be recognized as any thing but characteristic of Mr. Poe, who was always haunted by a terrible though vague apprehension of death and the grave. When the hospital physician became satisfied that the author of "William Wilson" — a favorite tale of Mr. Poe — and of "The Raven" had written his last story and his last poem, he addressed him, concernedly and kindly, saying

Mr. Poe, it is my painful duty to inform you that you have, in my judgment, only a very short time to live. If you have any friends whom you would like to see, name [Printed page 285] them, and your wish shall be gratified; I will summon them."

"Friends!" exclaimed the dying son of genius — "Friends!" — repeating the word for a moment, as if it had no longer a definite meaning; "my best friend would be he who would take a pistol and blow out these d——d wretched brains!" pressing his hand to his forehead as he uttered the awful imprecation.

During the six days of Mr. Poe's survival after he was placed in the hospital, he had only a few intervals of rationality, one of which was availed of as just described. That his disease was mania a potu, I have never for a moment doubted. Being this, and following as it so soon did upon his "drunken debauch," it struck me with amazement, when I came to the above-quoted statement in the usually reliable BEADLE'S MAGAZINE, to observe that it was put forth so unqualifiedly and so flatly in contradiction of a work so justly accepted as high authority as the New American Cyclopaedia.

Glad should I be, as a sincere friend as well as an enthusiastic admirer of the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, could the assignment of such an agency as the actual cause of his death be made with truthfulness. Unreliable as I had personal reason to know Rufus W. Griswold to be where there was half as much temptation as arose from his well-known jealousy of Poe, to tell a lie instead of the truth, I am bound to say that he failed to exaggerate, in his biography of him, as to this point. Nor can I see what is to be gained by these frequent attempts to gloss over the facts of biographical story, while I can see very clearly where a great deal is to be lost. May I not go further, and say that, not only is there the negative result of a loss, but a positive damage to the cause of truth and social progress? The most enthusiastic of all the admirers and defenders of Mr. Poe, who knew him more intimately than the writer whose doubtless unintentional misstatement it is the purpose of this article to correct, herself saw that her eloquent plea might be considered to have made the path he trod less abhorrent to others. Hence the words of assurance, in her "Edgar Poe and his Critics," that, had she believed it would certainly have this effect, she "never would have proffered" that plea at all.

I can understand, and to some extent appreciate, the force of the Pagan maxim, "De mortuis nil nisi bonum." But, when Christians follow its inculcations, I do not expect them to go beyond them, and not only omit to say any thing evil of the dead, but to make truth-straining attempts to say good things of them, to the misleading the public mind and doing positive injury to the cause of good morals.

I come, now, directly to the inference drawn by the writer already referred to, that Poe's death was caused by "brain fever," as the result of a "beating." I am positive that there was no evidence whatever of any such violence having been used upon his person, when I went to his rescue at the tavern. Nor was there any given at the hospital, where its detection would have been certain, if external violence had really been the cause of his insanity, for there would have been some physical traces of it on the patient's person.

In this view of the question, I respectfully submit that it is high time that the hypothesis of a beating were dropped. As an isolated fact, the probabilities do not sustain it, to say nothing of its alleged fatal results.

I now proceed to give the true version of the place and manner of Mr. Poe's burial. Among the false statements I have met with was one to the effect that he had been "buried in the Potter's Field of his native city." As one of only three, or perhaps four, persons — not counting the undertaker and the drivers of the hearse and a single carriage, which made up the entire funeral train of the author of "The Raven" — who followed the body to the grave, I am happy to be able to testify that the truth, bad enough as it is, does not sustain this story. The burying-place of Poe was an old one belonging to the "Westminster Presbyterian Church," which had ceased to be used much, in 1849, because of its location in a populous portion of Baltimore — in Green street. There were many old vaults in it; and, when our little cortege reached it, I naturally consoled myself with the thought that his relatives — two of whom were present, and one of these the officiating clergyman — had secured him at least a temporary resting-place in one of those family tombs. But it proved to be otherwise. A grave had been dug among the crumbling mementos of mortality. Into this the plainly-coffined body was speedily lowered, and then the earth was shoveled directly upon the coffin-lid. This was so unusual even in the burials of the poor, that I could not help noticing the absence of not only the customary box, as an inclosure for the coffin itself, but of even the commonest boards to [Printed page 286] prevent the direct contact of the decomposing wet earth with it. I shall never forget the emotion of disappointment, mingled with disgust and something akin to resentment, that thrilled through my whole being as I heard the clods and stones resound from the coffin-lid and break the more than ordinarily solemn stillness of the scene, as it impressed me. It seemed as if Heartlessness, too often found directing the funeral rites of the poor and forsaken ones of earth, had suddenly become personified into a malign goddess, and that she had ordered those awfully discordant sounds as best befitting her own unearthly mood.

At the head and foot of the grave a piece of common undressed pine board, as unlettered as unsuited, was placed —

"Only this and nothing more!"

Nor has any more befitting head or foot-piece ever been substituted for the ones I have described, although there has been much talk about "rescuing the remains of the author of 'The Raven' from their obscurity, and building a monument worthy of his genius," etc. Recently a "Poe Monument Association" has been started in Baltimore, and some well-intended but rather spasmodic efforts have been made, through lectures or concerts, to raise the funds necessary to build the proposed memento, but I believe with very inconsiderable results. But it is hoped that BEADLE'S MONTHLY will prove to have furnished a channel of influence upon the public mind, not only in the most concerned city of Baltimore — the birth-place as well as the death and burial-place of Poe — through which a fresh stimulus shall be applied more widely and successfully than heretofore, resulting in the erection of the proposed monument at no very distant day.

This is the second time, since the death of Poe, that the writer of this has called attention to the condition of his remains, in the hope of doing something toward the “consummation so devoutly to be wished.” And I beg leave to remind such as may be inclined to assist in such an undertaking that the necessary ground was long since proffered by the “Baltimore Cemetery,” on the condition that a creditable monument were erected over the grave. This was, then, a new cemetery, and it could afford to be generous. I doubt not its directors would be found ready to fulfill their promise, even at this late day. With the improvements made in this city of the dead since then, and in consideration of its accessibility as well as its attractiveness, it strikes me that no more appropriate place of final repose could be selected. The fact of its bearing the name of the city itself, where was born the deceased son of genius, whose memory its earlier directors stood ready to honor — and, may I not say, to be honored at the same time? — would seem to add to rather than detract from its appropriateness for the purpose in view.

In saying this, I do not wish to be understood as doubting the judgment or taste of those of my former fellow-citizens who are so creditably exerting themselves to secure the desired removal and more creditable disposition of Poe’s remains. My only motive is a desire to forward their well-conceived and no doubt faithfully prosecuted enterprise, by arousing a renewed interest in it — for I feel, with them, that it is a melancholy shame that the bones of such a transcendently gifted writer as Edgar Allan Poe should have so long been permitted to molder in an unmarked grave in an abandoned graveyard, and that in the city of his birth and of the earliest triumphs of his matchless pen!

It was not my purpose, in this paper, to write a word about the living career of my deceased friend, beyond what has necessarily been already said in connection with its lamentably unfortunate close. But the mention of the earlier triumphs of his pen in his native city, just made, has reminded me of an incident which has been overlooked, seemingly, by most of his biographers, and yet one peculiarly illustrative of not only the fact that he was gifted, by nature, with rare capacity as a writer in the field of the ideal, but — what is nearly as equally important, in most cases, to early success — he was conscious of this himself; and hence dared to do what few youthful aspirants would have dreamed of accomplishing. The fact to which I here refer, I will now give as a conclusion to this article.

The Baltimore Visitor had offered money-prizes for a first and a second best tale. At that early day, especially in provincial places, such as Baltimore was then, fiction-writers seldom ventured to publish their articles over their real names. Young Poe had not dared to depart from the prevailing custom. Hence he was known, in a literary capacity, only to a small circle of friends. Imagine the surprise, then, with which the reading public was startled, when the prizes aforesaid were awarded, by the announcement that a [Printed page 287] single pen had won them both, and that it had been wielded by a mere youth, named Poe!

One of these prize-winning tales was “The Gold Bug.” The title of the other I do not now recall. Although always regarded and referred to with evident satisfaction by himself, “The Gold Bug” was not its author’s favorite in after life, but “William Wilson,” as he gave others of his friends besides myself to understand the reason being that the latter was what the former was not, viz., a reflex of his so greatly altered selfship, considered in relation to his intellectual and physical state at the time it was penned. For, whatever may have been the original tendency of Edgar Allan Poe’s mind, no one who ever had opportunities to receive light from himself on the subject, could doubt that his views of man, in his relations to the universe, had undergone a great change after the commencement of his literary career, so that readers who might look for his later weird and unearthly creations in “The Gold Bug,” or others of his earlier productions,

would seek them there in vain. He himself was so fully conscious of this change in the tone as well as the philosophy of his productions, that, in collecting his volume, entitled "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque," he left out more than one story which had proved most effectual in the line of the descriptive and the sensational, because of its lacking the peculiar characteristics of the latter-day creations of his singularly enchanting pen. J. E. Snodgrass, M. D.