

POE

(Poe is a drinker who rarely loses his extraordinary facility for language, and he affects a slightly aristocratic Southern accent. He is seemingly unaffected by Connor's criticism.)
I might have selected many individual instances more replete with essential suffering than any of these vast generalities of disaster. To be buried alive is, however, beyond question the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality...

MAGGIE

(Overwhelmed by the image she has seen only in magazines.)
Oh, my god...!

CONNER

(likewise shocked)
...Mr. Poe?

POE

(continuing as if unbroken; he crosses center and places his hat on a table there.)
...but the boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends and the other begins? I have the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience to prove that such premature interments have actually taken place. Not very long ago, right here in the city of Baltimore, in fact, where it occasioned a widely extended excitement, the wife of one of the most respectable citizens – a lawyer and a member of Congress – was seized with a sudden and unaccountable illness that completely baffled the skill of her physicians. After much suffering, she died or supposedly died. No one suspected, indeed, or had reason to suspect, that she was not actually dead. She presented all of the ordinary appearances of death. (He removes his cape and hands it to Maggie and gazes deeply into her eyes.) Thank you, my dear...

MAGGIE

(softly)

Ooooooh, my god! I mean...(she attempts a curtsy)...oh, my god!

POE

(continuing his tale; Poe has retained his walking stick to steady himself as he continues.)
For three days the body was preserved unburied during which time it acquired a stony rigidity. The funeral was hastened on fear of an impending decomposition. The lady was deposited in her family vault, which, for three subsequent years, was undisturbed. At the expiration of this term it was opened for the reception of a sarcophagus. But, alas, how fearful a shock awaited the husband who personally threw open the door. As it portals swung outwards, some white-appareled object fell rattling with in his arms. It was the skeleton of his wife in her yet unmolded shroud.

MAGGIE (A deep gasp, then:)

Oh...my...God!

CONNER

Sweet Jesus!

POE

A careful investigation rendered it evident that she had revived soon after her entombment – that her struggles with the coffin had led it to fall from a ledge or shelf to the floor, where it was so broken to permit her escape. There was a large fragment of the coffin near with which she had endeavored to arrest attention by striking the iron door. While thus occupied, she probably swooned, or died through sheer terror, and, in failing, her shroud became entangled in some of the ironwork which projected inwardly. Thus she remained, and thus she rotted... erect.

(A beat)

CONNER

(Unable to muster anything else but an astonished whisper.)
Mr. Poe...!

POE

(A slight, unsteady bow.)

Your humble servant. I am here to inquire after my old friend, the Honorable Cornelius Ryan, Esquire, Proprietor of Gunners' Hall, Poet...well, Lover of Poetry...and Keeper of the Sacred Vessel of Dionysus!

(There is an uncomfortable pause. Poe breaks the silence.)

POE

I am speaking of my dear friend, Cornelius Ryan...surely you know him. He is the owner of this fine establishment.

CONNER

Mr. Ryan...I mean, my father...has passed away - two years ago...and my mother shortly after, sir.

(A difficult pause. Poe tries to steady himself.)

POE

Connie Ryan is dead?

(A Beat)

CONNER

It pains me to say so, sir; yes.

POE

Of course, of course it does, my good boy. And where is your father buried? I shall visit his grave this very evening.

CONNER

He's buried on Green Mount, sir - with my mother.

(Poe looks at him.)

There is a new cemetery there, sir, has opened since you've been away.

POE

(Suddenly, after a brief preparatory pause:)

Hark death is calling!
While I speak to thee
The jaw is falling,
The red cheek paling,
The strong limbs failing;
Ice with the warm blood mixing;
The eye balls fixing.
Nine times goes the passing bell:
Ye merry souls farewell.
The old earth
Had a birth
As all men know
Long ago,
And the old earth must die.
So let the warm winds range
And the blue wave beat the shore;
For even' and morn
Ye will never see
Through eternity.
All things were born.
Ye will never come more, -
For all things must die.

(He is palpably moved)

Lord Tennyson - the greatest of all poets.

(Looking to Conner)

Your father was my dear friend. He was a beautiful soul and very kind. You have his nose and chin, but you look like your mother, God rest her soul. (A beat. Poe keeps going.) I remember you when you were a young lad. Shy and a bit squarish, as I recall. Thickish. But you have become a fine, handsome young man, (Towards Maggie) as I'm sure Mrs. Ryan the younger, agrees.

CONNER

There is no Mrs. Ryan, the younger, sir. This is our barmaid, Maggie.

POE

(To Maggie)

Ah, I am happy to make your acquaintance, my dear. Then, I will have a glass of your best sherry - an Amontillado, if you have some in store. (He moves to sit.)

CONNER

(Quickly)

Perhaps I can interest you in some breakfast, Mr. Poe. Our cook, Mrs. O'Donnell, has some very fresh eggs and ham and is heating the stove even now. Maggie, perhaps you could fetch Mr. Poe some breakfast.

(Maggie is deeply opposed to this idea but starts to go.)

POE

(Stopping Maggie)

Thank you, no; thank you, my boy...uh...(Searching for the name)

CONNER

Conner, sir.

POE

Connie - after your father, no doubt! You were just a lad the last time I last saw you and my memory is not, alas, what it once was. (To the great beyond) Cornelius Ryan, the world is a darker place without you! (Back to earth and to his seat.) Thank you, Master Connie. It's very kind of you, but I never eat at this time of the day. It makes me unwell - (To Maggie) an Amontillado, if you would be so kind, my dear.

CONNER

(Again, quickly)

I'm afraid we have no Amontillado, Mr. Poe.

POE

How unfortunate. I was very much looking forward to a fine sherry this morning, and now, it seems, we must honor your father, alas, not with Amontillado, but perhaps with...the best brandy you have on the premises!