

Edward Rowe Snow:  
The Facts Behind  
"The Cask of Amontillado"

Edgar Allan Poe became a private in the army in 1827, and was sent out to Fort Independence on Castle Island in Boston Harbor. Actually, were it not for Poe's serving at Castle Island, "The Cask of Amontillado" would never have been written.

While at Fort Independence Poe became fascinated with the inscriptions on a gravestone on a small monument outside the walls of the fort. . . .

One Sunday morning he arose early and . . . copied with great care the entire wording on the marble monument. The following inscription was recorded from the western side of the monument:

*The officers of the U.S. Regiment of Lt. Art'y erected this monument as a testimony of their respect & friendship for an amiable man & gallant officer.*

Then he moved to the eastern panel, where he inscribed in his notebook the famous lines from Collins' ode:<sup>1</sup>

*"Here honour comes, a Pilgrim gray. To deck the turf, that wraps his clay."*

After resting briefly, he attacked the northern side of the edifice, and then copied the fourth panel facing South Boston:

*Beneath this stone are deposited the remains of Lieut. ROBERT F. MASSIE, of the U.S. Regt. of Light Artillery.*

*Near this spot on the 25th, Decr. 1817, fell Lieut. Robert F. Massie. Aged 21 years.*

Extremely interested in the wording of the fourth panel, which said "Near this spot fell" Lieutenant Massie, he decided to find out all he could about the duel. Interviewing every officer at the fort, he soon learned the unusual tale of the two officers and their fatal combat.

During the summer of 1817, Poe learned, twenty-year-old Lieutenant Robert F. Massie of Virginia had arrived at Fort Independence as a newly appointed officer. Most of the men at the post came to enjoy Massie's friendship, but one officer, Captain Green, took a violent dislike to him. Green was known at the fort as a bully and a dangerous swordsman.

When Christmas vacations were allotted, few of the officers were allowed to leave the fort, and Christmas Eve found them up in the old barracks hall, playing cards. Just before midnight, at the height of the card game, Captain Green sprang to his feet, reached across the table and slapped Lieutenant Massie squarely in the face. "You're a cheat," he roared, "and I demand immediate satisfaction!"

Massie quietly accepted the bully's challenge, naming swords as the weapons for the contest. Seconds<sup>2</sup> arranged for the duel to take place the next morning at dawn.

Christmas morning was clear but bitter. The two contestants and their seconds left the inner walls of the fort at daybreak for Dearborn Bastion. Here the seconds made a vain attempt at reconciliation. The duel began.

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1. *Collins' ode*, "Ode Written in the Year 1746" by William Collins (1721-1759), a British poet.

2. *Seconds*, supporters who arranged combats for duelists, saw to the observance of fair play, and secured the help of a doctor on the scene.

Captain Green, an expert swordsman, soon had Massie at a disadvantage and ran him through. Fatally wounded, the young Virginian was carried back to the fort, where he died that afternoon. His many friends mourned the passing of a gallant officer.

A few weeks later a fine marble monument was erected to Massie's memory. Placed over his grave at the scene of the encounter, the monument reminded all who saw it that an overbearing bully had killed the young Virginian.

Feeling against Captain Green ran high for many weeks, and then suddenly he completely vanished. Years went by without a sign of him, and Green was written off the army records as a deserter.

According to the story which Poe finally gathered together, Captain Green had been so detested by his fellow officers at the fort that they decided to take a terrible revenge on him for Massie's death. . . .

Visiting Captain Green one moonless night, they pretended to be friendly and plied him with wine until he was helplessly intoxicated. Then, carrying the captain down to one of the ancient dungeons, the officers forced his body through a tiny opening which led into the subterranean casemate. . . .<sup>3</sup>

By this time Green had awakened from his drunken stupor and demanded to know what was taking place. Without answering, his captors began to shackle him to the floor, using the heavy iron handcuffs and

footcuffs fastened into the stone. Then they all left the dungeon and proceeded to seal the captain up alive inside the windowless casemate, using bricks and mortar which they had hidden close at hand.

Captain Green shrieked in terror and begged for mercy, but his cries fell on deaf ears. The last brick was finally inserted, mortar applied and the room sealed up, the officers believed, forever. Captain Green undoubtedly died a horrible death within a few days. . . .

As Edgar Allan Poe heard this story, he took many notes. . . . Poe was soon asked to report to the post commander, and the following conversation is said to have taken place:

"I understand," began the officer, "that you've been asking questions about Massie's monument and the duel which he fought?"

"I have, sir," replied Poe meekly.

"And I understand that you've learned all about the subsequent events connected with the duel?"

"I have, sir."

"Well, you are never to tell that story outside the walls of this fort."

Poe agreed that he would never *tell* the story, but years afterwards he did *write* the tale based on this incident, transferring the scene across the ocean to Europe and changing both the characters and the story itself. He named the tale "The Cask of Amontillado."

In 1905, eighty-eight years after the duel, when the work-

men were repairing a part of the old fort, they came across a section of the ancient cellar marked on the plans as a small dungeon. They were surprised to find only a blank wall where the dungeon was supposed to be. . . . Several lanterns were brought down and a workman was set to chipping out the old mortar. . . . Eventually it was possible for the smallest man in the group to squeeze through the aperture.

"It's a skeleton!" they heard him cry a moment later, and he rushed for the opening, leaving the lantern behind him.

Several of the others then pulled down the entire brick barrier and went into the dungeon where they saw a skeleton shackled to the floor with a few fragments of an 1812 army uniform clinging to the bones.

The remains could not be identified but they were given a military funeral and placed in the Castle Island cemetery in a grave marked UNKNOWN.