



'A Gentleman Rather the Worse for Wear'

The brilliant young writer set out for New York and one week later was found near death in Baltimore.

What happened that week—that long, lost week—is one of the greatest mysteries of literature.

He was 40 years old, still young for an author of genius. And already he had assured his future fame.

He had invented the model for the detective story—a brilliant mind confronts a baffling mystery and solves that mystery through the power of logic and reasoning.

He had added a new dimension to

the short-story form. His brooding tales of shock and horror would fascinate readers for generations to come—and give rise to a whole new way of expressing powerful emotions.

He had written poems of hypnotic power, using rhyme and rhythm in ways no one had ever imagined before.

And then, suddenly, his life itself became a mystery.

During September 1849, Edgar Allan Poe decided to leave Richmond, Va. and travel by boat to Baltimore and then go on to New York, where he had some affairs to settle. On September 26, he said good-bye to friends in Richmond. They noticed that he did not look well. When he complained of a fever, they urged him to stay, but he said that he did not want to miss his boat, which left early the next morning.

A week later, on October 3, Dr. Joseph Snodgrass in Baltimore, Md., received a message from a young man.

There is a gentleman, rather the worse for wear, at Ryan's 4th ward tavern who goes under the name of Edgar A. Poe and who appears in great dis-

trength & says he is acquainted with you, and I assure you he is in need of immediate assistance.

Snodgrass, who had encouraged Poe's literary career, went to the tavern and found the young author stretched out on a bench, sick and delirious. He was wearing cheap, filthy clothes that didn't fit and were obviously not his. He clutched a fancy, carved wooden cane as if hanging on to his last connection to a respectable life.

Snodgrass noted distastefully: *His face was haggard and unwashed, his hair unkempt, and his whole physique repulsive. He was so utterly stupefied with liquor that the intellectual flash of his eyes had vanished or rather had been quenched in the bowl. The muscles of speech seemed paralyzed, and incoherent mutterings were all that were heard.*

Assuming that Poe was in a drunken stupor and angered by that thought, Snodgrass made no attempt to see whether Poe was ill rather than drunk. Poe's Baltimore relatives arrived on the scene. Seeing his condition, they said they could not possibly look after

him in their homes. Snodgrass arranged to have Poe taken to Washington College Hospital.

At the hospital, the helpless author was placed in a grim, prisonlike room with barred windows—a room much like those he had imagined in his most horrific stories. He remained delirious, his arms and legs shaking, while he tried to talk to imaginary creatures he saw on the wall. Even when he regained consciousness, his speech was confused. His condition worsened, and Dr. John Moran could do little more than have him bathed and try to make him comfortable.

Poe died on Sunday, October 7, 1849. According to Dr. Moran, his last words were "Lord, help my poor soul."

What had happened? What series of circumstances had left Edgar Allan Poe in Baltimore, helpless and at death's door? What kind of person was this brilliant writer? What in his life had left him so vulnerable to the forces that finally overwhelmed him?

The play that follows will provide clues to possible answers to those questions.