

The Revivalist  
-- Stephen S. Power

In 1908 George Poe, a distant cousin of the writer, received an invitation from a wealthy New York City couple. They had read in *The New York Times* about the recent demonstration of his breathing machine for a group of doctors in Brooklyn, and as collectors of curiosities and curious experiences they desired a demonstration.

Poe was hesitant. His machine was a medical device, not an engine of entertainment. For several years he had toured the country, promoting the machine to members of the medical establishment. Should they adopt it, uncounted lives, he said, could be restored. Their wonder, unfortunately, was undermined by skepticism, professional prejudice—Poe was not a doctor—and even superstition. Giving a private demonstration, as if he were some parlor psychic, might prove fatal to his efforts.

The invitation, however, also mentioned a fee, and even for a man who had built his chemical company into America's greatest supplier of nitrous oxide, that fee was tantalizingly large.

Tours cost money, Poe considered. Development cost money. And the private demonstration would probably remain just that, private. The couple eschewed society, and little was known about them. Of course, he would tell no one. So Poe accepted.

The couple lived in a townhouse far from the fashionable blocks. When Poe arrived he was greeted by the couple themselves. They were as tan, lean and muscular as ditch diggers. The husband wore a tropical-weight tailored suit, a pristine white shirt and a red four-in hand.

His wife wore a jacket and blouse matching his, a daring riding skirt and a delicate red scarf wrapped twice around her throat. She shared his haircut too.

The tie and scarf bore a thin white stripe just beneath the knot. No club Poe knew of had that color scheme.

The husband's hand engulfed Poe's with warmth and goodwill. His wife accepted Poe's hand with an equal, if more graceful gusto.

Poe's driver brought up the plain white casket, which held the breathing machine. Poe asked where he should put it. The husband said he would take the casket himself and dismissed the driver with a gleaming tip.

"Have you no servant," said Poe, "who might attend to that?"

"We have no regular staff, Mr. Poe," the husband said, leading him and his wife into a study off the foyer. "As a practical matter, we're here too infrequently to keep one. As a philosophical matter, though: We've survived the South American jungles, the Asian and African deserts, the storms of all seven seas. How could I be above a little lifting at home? Or cooking? Even cleaning."

His wife's expression disputed the latter point. She said, "And it's a social matter, Mr. Poe. Too many people cede their real lives to their servants so they can submit themselves to the pageantry of society. They never realize that pursuing the needs of everyday life can be as adventurous as trekking in the wild."

The husband placed the casket on a table covered in white linen. At one end sat a slatted crate with a black and brown puppy that catapulted itself out of a nap when he approached.

The husband gave up his fingers for the puppy to gobble. “We’ve devoted our lives instead to climbing to the tip of every branch on the Tree of Life and marveling at the vistas. We would feel as alive as this poor puppy.”

“But, please,” his wife said, “we’re going on. If you would care to begin.”

Poe bowed and assumed his position behind the table. A pair of comfortable chairs faced him at a respectful distance, a small stand between them. On it was a ceramic ashtray, a teak box with matches, and twin pipes. The couple sat, took up the pipes, and lit each other’s. Their attention to one another was so graceful it entirely damped Poe’s shock at seeing a woman smoke a pipe.

Poe opened the casket and pulled out a thick black cloth, then the machine. It consisted of several rubber tubes, two brass piston cylinders operated with a handle, and an adjustable rubber mask. As he arranged the machine, he glanced around the room.

On the paneled walls between the tall deep bookcases hung many strange implements: blades curved and pronged, chains with hooks, manacles with pins that would run between a radius and ulna. Square jars were tucked amidst the leather volumes, each holding an indistinct form suspended in a yellow liquid. Most disturbing were the human skulls, which had been crudely trepanned. The skulls were not prehistoric.

It seems they’ve climbed a few branches of the Tree of Life they shouldn’t have, Poe thought.

He gave his standard introduction. “What you are about to see employs techniques that were introduced decades ago, but they have largely been ignored by medical science. Tonight we shall take a step towards correcting that.”

As a sweet smoke whirled from the couple's pipes, Poe took the puppy from its crate and wrestled it to the table. He said, "You may assist, if you'd like, sir. You'll see first-hand then there is no trick about my machine. My company may sell nitrous oxide, but I'll use none."

The husband put down his pipe and went behind the table. At Poe's direction, he replaced Poe's hand behind the puppy's neck and stroked the animal. The puppy would quiet down for a moment, then lick his knuckles furiously. The husband protested, laughing, to his wife's amusement.

"He followed us home the other day," she explained. "And we've fallen head over heels for him. We hope he's an adequate subject. We'd hate to lose the little thing."

"No need to worry about that," said Poe.

The puppy soon exhausted itself and lay still. Poe handed the husband the cloth. "Is there any chemical on the cloth? Has it been treated in any way?"

The husband held it up to the light. He clenched it, sniffed it, let the puppy sniff it. The puppy clamped down on it and shook it. "No," he said. "No different than the cloth on my bed. You should see the tatters he's made of it."

"Thank you. Now—" Poe took the cloth from him, wrapped tightly around the puppy's head and locked it in place with a twist at the neck.

The puppy became a terrible imp, its tiny nails ripping at the husband's hands, its spine and legs twisting and spreading. His grip never faltered, even though he wasn't looking at the puppy. He was looking at his wife.

She drifted forward in her chair until her toes were braced on the floor and her hands clenched the front of the cushion, as if to keep her chest from pressing any farther forward. She didn't breathe. Neither did he.

When the puppy went limp the wife did too. Her cheeks and brow shone in the lamps' yellow light. She pushed herself back and tugged gently at one end of her scarf.

Poe undid the cloth. "Is it your opinion, sir," he said, "that the specimen is dead, not merely unconscious?"

"Yes," the husband said. He lifted a little paw with a finger until it flopped off. A few drops of urine glistened on its belly.

"Then if you'll turn it over, please." Poe placed the mask around the puppy's head and cinched it tight. He started working the machine's handle. The cylinder's pumped. There was a strange rhythm to it, 10 or 12 beats with one pump, then one or two with the other. The tubes whistled thin and tuneless.

The wife held her pipe between her hands and her hands between her knees. Deep furrows appeared on her husband's brow. They were fixed on the puppy, lips moving together with Poe's.

A moment passed, another, then it started to wiggle, and they both laughed. The husband held up the confused creature, and she applauded.

Poe bowed. "You can imagine the number of lives this machine might save," he said. This was his usual conclusion, but it felt cheap here. He started to pack up the machine.

The husband closed the casket while his wife moved between Poe and the door. Mr. Poe looked at them with some concern.

"Mr. Poe," the husband said, "have you ever used your machine on a man?"

Poe looked from one to other. "No. I've never had the occasion."

"What if I were that occasion?" the husband said.

“That’s a monstrous idea, sir.” Poe wished he could have put more indignation into his response, but he had been too stunned to muster it.

The wife stepped towards Poe. “You must want to know if your machine can fulfill its ultimate purpose.”

“The use of specimens is a scientific necessity,” Poe said. “A moral necessity. It would be unthinkable to experiment on a man.”

“But unlike this puppy,” the husband said. “I am willing. Why should my experience be any different?”

“Because,” here Poe’s science failed him, “because you have a soul.”

The husband smiled. “And there we have it. This is our chance to test that theory. To see if death is just an empty sea or whether we do land on a new world. And what is that place truly like? Your machine, Mr. Poe, would let me travel there and explore, even to see the face of God, and then return to tell the tale. The greatest Columbus.”

Poe backed away from the couple, jostling the table. One cylinder clattered off and dragged the rest onto the floor. The puppy wailed.

The wife picked up the cloth. “No need to hesitate over this. I would take care of the first step.”

“You only need you to bring me back,” her husband said. “I know you can. And when you do, I will have my answers, and you will have yours.”

A terrible thought came to Poe: if he did bring the husband back, he could not tell a soul. He would be infamous. But they would. Surely they would. Who hides a new continent? And whatever the husband saw, others would pay to see themselves. He would be made very wealthy on the bloodiest money, then maybe even wealthier on the best science, having proved his case.

Poe realized they had convinced him.

“He must be restrained,” Poe said. “He’ll struggle, and we couldn’t hold him down.”

The couple beamed. “We’ve thought of that,” the wife said. She flipped up the edge of the table linen to reveal a row of holes drilled along the edge of the table. “There’s rope in that cabinet. I’ll thread it through these holes and bind his legs and arms.”

The wife retrieved the rope while her husband put the casket and puppy’s crate on the floor. He hopped up on the table as if he were at the doctor’s, loosened his tie and collar, kicked off his shoes and settled back. With the efficiency of a sailor, the wife trussed him in minutes.

Poe tried to distract himself by petting the puppy, but it snarled at him.

When he stood up, the wife was dabbing her husband’s face with the cloth.

“I shouldn’t be afraid,” he said.

“There’s no helping it,” she said, “but we’ll be together again soon.” She kissed his eyes, his cheeks, his lips, lifting his head to slip the cloth underneath it.

Poe picked up the machine and arranged it on the table. He tested the handle and inspected the cylinders. The fall hadn’t damaged them. The tubes were still tightly married. He regretted that he and his wife had never kissed like the couple.

“Are you ready, Mr. Poe?” she said. He nodded.

She twisted the loose ends of the cloth together until they were flush against her husband’s neck and the cloth was tight across his face. He quivered at first, then kicked, kicked again, and bucked. The ropes abraded his wrists and ankles. His head rocked hard, nearly pulling the cloth out his wife’s hands, but she bore down.

Her face hovered above the cloth, her lips pulled back, a spider’s thread of drool connecting her to him. The ends of her scarf licked his chest. She heaved a leg onto the table for

more leverage. He jerked towards her so savagely, the table legs came off the floor. She leaned against him and the table slammed down again.

Poe threw himself over the machine to keep it from falling. He smelled the sweat in the small of her back.

She was nearly on top of him now, her leg between his, her hips pushing his back down. That calmed him. His breathing shallowed. His feet fell apart. His fists opened. She slid down, laid her head on his chest and released the knot.

“We’ve only a moment,” Poe whispered.

The wife nodded and drew the cloth away from her husband’s face and screamed. His eyes were huge, stippled with red dots. His mouth gaped, blood between his teeth and his tongue, flaccid and purple, lolling across them. She nearly fell of the table getting away.

“Bring him back! That’s not my husband.” She clutched the cloth to her mouth.

Poe had some difficulty attaching the mask, which was built for specimen faces, the wife jerking sympathetically with each movement he made. He started pumping. The irregular beat grated at their ears. The husband’s chest rose and fell, but he didn’t stir.

The wife grabbed his foot, tickled the sole, jabbed it with her thumbnail. No reaction.

Poe pumped more furiously. He had experimented on animals so long, he had grown used to their small lungs and their heart rates, plus he had not really cared if the animals lived or died except in a betting way. He could not fail now, and he was woefully prepared to succeed.

Poe stared at the husband’s chest. He stopped pumping for a moment to check for a pulse. Nothing. The wife practically screamed at the interruption. She radiated beside him.

He started pumping again, gasping in lieu of counting. The handle slipped through his fingers, it was so sweaty. The tubes whistled fiercely. The cylinders creaked. He wondered if



something had indeed broken, a tube cut or a cylinder leaking, so the husband wasn't receiving enough air. He couldn't tell.

Choking came from the mask. His wife fumbled at her husband's neck. She rubbed the place where she found the pulse, then wrenched off the mask. Her own face looked as leathery.

"He's here, Mr. Poe," she said. "He's here."

The wife's hand found her husband's. He had just the strength to hook his fingers on it.

Poe knelt in the shadows beside the table. He couldn't think of what to pray for, though.

When he rose, she was again dabbing her husband's cheek with the cloth. His horrific expression melted. His eyes focused and unfocused. His lips opened and closed like a fish.

Poe jumbled the machine into the casket. The couple could keep the cloth. They didn't notice him hurry out.

The next day a messenger brought Poe a bank draft. He slipped it beneath the liner of his desk's bottom drawer.

Within a few days Poe's disgust was displaced by an urge to visit the couple and discuss the husband's experiences. A letter brought no response, nor did a second. After a week, he went to the house. The couple was gone. To where, none of their neighbors could say.

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