

## **--A Providence Affair --**

### **Prologue**

The poet and literary critic Sarah Helen Power Whitman was born in Providence on January 19<sup>th</sup> 1803, a mere eleven days after Governor James Monroe of Virginia set sail to Paris to oversee the purchase of New Orleans from Napoleon Bonaparte's rule. The daughter of the merchant Nicholas Power and Anne Marsh, Helen – she went by her middle name – was raised on 50 Benefit Street in Providence, for the most part, by her mother. Helen must have had a strained relationship with her father. In 1812, when she was only nine years-old, Nicholas Power was captured by the British during a trip to the tropical and volcanic island of St. Kitts in the West Indies. He was released at the end of the War of 1812, but did not return to Providence for another twenty years. When he did return, Nicholas Power chose to live separately from his family, an act that must have been considered scandalous by the prominent residents residing on the north end of Benefit Street.

Despite the financial difficulties caused by her father's absence, Helen was well-educated and spoke German, French and Italian. On July 10<sup>th</sup> 1828, twenty-five year-old Helen married John Winslow Whitman, a lawyer from Boston whom she had met while he was a student at Brown University. After their marriage at the Providence Episcopal Church, Helen and John Whitman moved to Boston, where Helen published her first poem, "Retrospection," in the *American Ladies' Magazine*. They were married for only five years before John fell ill and died in July 1833. A widow, Helen returned to Providence and moved in with her mother and sister, Susan Anna Power.

Back in her native Providence, Helen would spend much of her time at the Providence Athenaeum, a library on Benefit Street which was to be completed in 1838. Past the Greek-style columns of the grand main entrance and inside the library's tomb-like stone building, Helen could be found among the books, writing, reading and experimenting with ideas on feminism, spiritualism and abolitionism. The young library would soon witness Helen's love affair with the writer and poet Edgar Allan Poe, for which Providence's famous poetess is most remembered today.

After the publication of his poem, “The Raven,” in January 1845, Edgar Allan Poe enjoyed a newfound fame among the intellectual crowd of New York City. For much of the remaining year, he would be invited to *conversaziones*, or *salons*, where wealthy and aristocratic individuals hosted artists, writers, musicians and poets in the elegant and richly-decorated drawing rooms of their brownstones. Of the salons in New York, the most respected were those hosted by Miss Anne Charlotte Lynch, a dark-haired, slender woman of thirty years who taught English at the Brooklyn Female Academy. She hosted Saturday evening salons at her residence on 116 Waverly Place, less than a block away from what would soon become the grounds of Washington Square Park and the gothic-style buildings of the University of the City of New York. The wealthy and powerful families of New York had started moving to this relatively unpopulated part of the city to escape the crowds and disease of downtown Manhattan. Starting around seven o’clock, Anne Lynch’s guests would arrive by horse-drawn omnibuses or private carriages, and converse over tea and cookies, listen to poetry recitations and dance to the uplifting and lively music of quadrilles and polkas. There would usually be about thirty-five people in attendance; however, crowds as large as ninety, overflowing up the staircases and out the door, were not unheard of at Miss Lynch’s highly popular gatherings.

It must have been at one of Anne Lynch’s salons that Edgar Allan Poe first heard of the name to which he would later address amorous verses and some of his most tender love letters. Anne Lynch greatly enjoyed Poe’s presence at her salons, as did others who were impressed by his interesting conversational topics and quiet, unpretentious and polite demeanor. Although he was suffering from financial difficulties at the time, Poe always attended the salons in clean and elegant attire. In a painting completed around the peak time of Poe’s salon-going in 1845, the poet is depicted with neatly trimmed sideburns, wearing a high-collared frock and dark blue

cravat. “He would not have attracted any particular attention from a stranger, except from his strikingly intellectual head and features, which bore the unmistakable character of genius,” wrote Anne Lynch to an acquaintance in 1854. To keep up a reputable appearance, Poe abstained from drinking at the salons, although it was no secret he had drinking problems. In fact, it is likely that alongside milder alcoholic drinks such as wine, port, champagne and whisky, Poe consumed absinthe, the bright green, highly alcoholic and hallucinogenic liquor of the wormwood plant. John Sartain, an engraver and magazine publisher, was known to drink absinthe and frequently entertained Poe at his office in Philadelphia, where he might have offered Poe the near-deadly mixture of brandy and absinthe. At the time, absinthe consumption was legal and consumed widely by Poe’s bohemian counterparts, especially in Europe. Many 19<sup>th</sup> century painters, such as Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas chose to immortalize the drink with their brushstrokes.

Poe’s alcoholism became known after several displays of public intoxication, accounts of which must be considered cautiously, as they were often exaggerated by his rivals in attempts to discredit his skills as a writer. The poet Thomas Holley Chivers once recalled seeing Poe sometime in June 1845, “tottering from side to side, as drunk as an Indian” on Nassau Street in New York. In his drunken state, an untimely coincidence brought Poe face-to-face with Lewis Gaylord Clark, editor of *The Knickerbocker* magazine. “What business had you to abuse me in the last Number of your Magazine?” Poe demanded, referring to Clark’s editorial critique of his latest article in the *Broadway Journal*. The thirty-seven year-old refined and esteemed editor was no doubt taken aback. He replied indignantly, “How did I know the Article referred to, was yours? You had always attached your name to all your articles before, and how, in Hell, did I know it was yours?” Chivers went to great lengths to restrain Poe, so that the editor could escape

unharmful. On a separate occasion later that year in Boston, Poe had supposedly been inebriated at an event for which he was to read a poem. Poe responded to criticism from the *New England Washingtonian* with a defiant response letter, saying, “we are perfectly willing to admit that we were drunk — in the face of at least eleven or twelve hundred Frogpondians [Bostonians] who will be willing to take an oath that we were not. . . . We shall get drunk when we please. As for the editor of the ‘Jefferson Teetotaler’ (or whatever it is),” he continued, “we advise her to get drunk, too, as soon as possible.”

There was no hint of this boisterous, drunken man among the cultured and genteel society in Anne Lynch’s salons, however. One can therefore imagine the hostess – in a simple but elegant, low-shouldered evening dress, perhaps with her hair curled into ringlets as was the fashion at the time – approaching Poe and engaging her agreeable guest in a conversation on literature and poetry. Miss Lynch, however delightful and sociable, was not the person who would capture Poe’s heart on this particular evening. “Are you familiar with the work of Helen Whitman?” she may have asked, referring to her poetess friend living in Providence. Poe, in fact, had never heard Whitman’s name before and continued listening, perhaps with feigned interest.

As Miss Lynch continued on about her friend’s “eccentricities” and “sorrows,” however, Poe realized that “she...referred to thoughts, sentiments, traits and moods which I thought to be my own, but which until that moment, I had believed to be my own solely – unshared by any human being. A profound sympathy took immediate possession of my soul,” and from that moment on, Poe was a man in love. He kept these feelings strictly to himself, however, for Miss Lynch’s descriptions had led him to believe that Helen Whitman was a married woman. At the time, Poe himself was actually married. In 1837, he had wedded his first-cousin, Virginia Eliza Clemm, or “Sissy,” as he called her, when she was only thirteen-years-old. Interestingly,

Virginia is recorded to be “the full age of 21 years” on their wedding bond. During his period of salon-going, however, Virginia was dying of consumption and she encouraged Poe’s friendship with other women.

Helen Whitman must have been on Poe’s mind when he accompanied his friend, the poet Frances Sargent Osgood, to Providence early in July 1845. Frances Osgood was married to Samuel Stillman Osgood, the portrait painter who had depicted the gentlemanly Poe in a blue cravat. Frances frequently attended Anne Lynch’s salons, where she met Poe and became very attached to him, most likely because her marriage to Samuel was strained at the time. The two poets had subsequently engaged in an exchange of flirtatious poems, some of which they had made public through various newspapers and had thus attracted much attention. The reason for their trip to Providence that summer was to attend a lecture, most likely at the Franklin Lyceum. This literary society hosted lectures at 62 Westminster Street, where the sixteen-story Turk’s Head Building would later be built in 1913. Lectures were usually given by members of the club, but special guests – including the sixth president of the United States, John Quincy Adams, and the renowned essayist and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson – were brought in to speak at the club as well.

During one of their evenings in Providence, Frances Osgood and Poe decided to take a midnight stroll along the fashionable north end of Benefit Street before returning to their hotel. It was a hot and humid summer night and the waters of the Cove below the steep hill were silver from the reflection of a full moon above. Every house on the street was silently tucked away in sleep among the elm trees, and the only sound to be heard was the desperate chirping of a single cricket. Not even the “...wind dared to stir, unless on tiptoe,” wrote Poe, of the night he would later immortalize in verse. Poe and Osgood continued on along the cobblestoned street, the hill

sloping downwards on their left. Perhaps it was the curious flickering light of a kerosene lamp that directed their gaze to the garden of the house at number seventy-six, which, in the darkness, they could make out to be a two-storied wooden house.

As Poe and Osgood approached number seventy-six, they saw all that fell under the illuminative power of the distant kerosene lamp: "...the upturned faces of a thousand / Roses that grew in an enchanted garden" and a woman, "clad in white...half reclining." Lamp in one hand, watering can in the other, the woman was dampening the flowers in her garden, an endeavor that is indeed most sensible to do at night when it is summertime. Their dry roots finally relieved after a long day of sunlight, the newly watered plants released an orchestra of perfumes into the thick summer air. To Poe, the woman's face seem to be filled with sorrow. Perhaps she was thinking back to her husband, John, who had passed away twelve years ago and left her widowed at the age of thirty. There was no way Poe could have guessed as such at the time. For now, his poetic mind saw that the roses replied to her pensiveness in smiles but then "died" from the enchantment of her presence.

"Why, is that not Helen Whitman? Frances Osgood must have murmured at one point as she realized the identity of the woman in the garden. It is likely that Osgood knew Whitman through Anne Lynch, the celebrated salon hostess back in New York City. Poe stopped in his tracks as he gazed – transfixed – at the woman whose named had just been uttered. "The merest whisper that concerned [Mrs. Whitman] awoke in me a shuddering sixth sense, vaguely compounded of fear, ecstatic happiness, and a wild, inexplicable consciousness of guilt." To Poe's relief, Helen Whitman finished watering the roses and went back into the house before Osgood could catch her attention. Osgood then told Poe that she would like to introduce him to this woman, who – little did she know – was in fact no stranger to his imagination. But Poe

refused to accompany her into Helen Whitman's house. "I dared neither go nor say why I could not. I dared not speak of [Mrs. Whitman] – much less see [her]," he would later write. Osgood could not see his reason and was angered by what she interpreted as impertinence and obstinacy.

In the darkness, the two poets quarreled and probably headed back sulkily to where they would be spending the night. Depending on whether or not they could afford it, Poe and Osgood might have chosen to stay at the City Hotel on Weybosset Street in downtown Providence. The hotel had opened in 1832 and boasted an elegant dancing hall, reading room and ladies' parlor. They may have been staying at an inn as well, such as the Golden Ball Inn at 159 Benefit Street. Presidents Washington and Monroe had stayed at this inn, which was a mere three-minute walk from Helen Whitman's house.

Back inside the house she occupied with her mother and sister, Helen Whitman was completely unaware of Edgar Allan Poe's romantic interests in her. She was, however, familiar with his work. On the topic of Poe's writing, Whitman once confessed to a friend that, "I devoured with a half-reluctant and fearful avidity every line that fell from his pen and always experienced in reading them a singular pain and oppression about the heart which I am almost constrained to refer to some occult and mysterious influence." But for now, Whitman's mind was elsewhere. As it was late, she probably changed out of her eccentric and flowing garments and folded the long scarf she usually wore around her neck, which followed behind her like a floating ribbon when she walked. Depending on the day, she might have also taken to preparing the parlor for the women that came to her regular Sunday evening séances. Dressed in black silks and a dark veil that covered her face, Helen Whitman acted as medium and attempted to communicate with spirits brought back from the dead. Fitting with her role as medium and her

interest in spiritualism, the poetess wore a small, wooden coffin suspended from her neck: a *memento mori*, which served to remind her, rather morbidly, that death was inevitable.

### **Three Years Later**

It is now February 1848 and much has changed. A carpenter by the name of James Wilson Marshall was building a sawmill on the American River in Northern California when, knee-deep in the clear river water, he exclaimed, “I have found it!” He was talking about gold – the “bright and brittle” rock which rested in his wet palm, its promise of instant wealth attracting over half a million people to the West in what would end up being a decade-long migration. Back in the East, Sarah Helen Whitman appears to still be living at 76 Benefit Street with her mother and unmarried sister, who suffers from acute mania. Edgar Allan Poe has lost Virginia to consumption and has suffered through a number of libel suits sparked by defamatory claims of forgery and deception. He is no longer welcome at Anne Lynch’s salons in New York, due to a scandal caused by Elizabeth Ellet, a young and amorous poet who turned vengeful after seeing affectionate letters between Poe and Osgood. Needless to say, Poe’s relationship with Osgood is damaged. He is also in bad health and impaired by what seems to be severe anxiety.

In February 1848, Anne Lynch was preparing to host a Valentine’s Day party in New York. The celebration of Valentine’s Day had become increasingly common by the mid-1800s, although some frowned upon the recognition of this day. Not long after Lynch’s party took place, the New York Times would criticize the tradition of sending Valentine’s Day cards, arguing that, “whether decent or indecent, they only please the silly and give the vicious an opportunity to develop their propensities, and place them, anonymously, before the comparatively virtuous. The custom with us has no useful feature, and the sooner it is abolished



the better.” Lynch disregarded such views, however, and wrote to over forty of her poet friends, asking them to compose Valentine verses for the notable guests that would be at her party. Helen Whitman was among the poets to which Anne Lynch had written and she decided to compose a valentine for Edgar Allan Poe, even though his name was not on the guest list that Lynch had sent.

Whitman’s verses were never read at Anne Lynch’s Valentine’s Day party on February 14<sup>th</sup> 1848. As Lynch later explained, the poem was excluded “...not because it is not beautiful in itself...” but because there was “a deeply rooted prejudice against him.” Whitman, nevertheless, insisted on publishing her poem and “To Edgar A. Poe” appeared a week later in *Home Journal*, a periodical that aimed to establish New York as the country’s literary center and of which Poe seems to have been a subscriber. Whitman’s poem was well-received by Poe, to say the least. He was thrilled simply to find out that Whitman knew of his *existence* and was subsequently “lost...for many weeks, in one continuous, delicious dream, where all was a vivid yet indistinct bliss...” Frances Osgood, on the other hand, was alarmed when she saw the poem in *Home Journal*. Despite her now strained relationship with Poe, she must have been distressed by the idea of another woman taking her place. It was likely out of jealousy that she warned Whitman, saying, “I see by the Home Journal that your beautiful evocation has reached “The Raven” in his eyrie and I suppose ere this he has swooped down upon your dove-cot in Providence. May Providence protect you if he has! He is in truth, ‘A glorious devil, with large heart and brain.’”

At this point, however, Poe was not about to openly court Whitman, as he was still under the impression that she was married. It must have been for this reason that he decided to pursue her anonymously, one letter after the other. First, Whitman received “To Helen,” which Poe had ripped out from a printed collection of his work. The poem had been written for his first love,

Helen Stanard, in 1831. “To one accustomed...to the Calculus of Probabilities,” as Poe described himself, the very fact that Whitman’s name matched that of his first love, instead of the far more common “Ellen” was a sign of “positive miracle.”

Not long after Poe’s first anonymous letter to Whitman, he sent her a poem written specifically for her, also titled “To Helen.” The poem opened with the lines, “I saw thee once – once only – years ago: / I must not say how many – but not many,” and was centered around the evening in 1845 when he had first laid eyes on the poetess in her garden. Since the letters were sent anonymously, Poe could not expect Whitman to write back; yet, he “...experienced an undefinable sorrow in [her] silence.” His desire to somehow connect to Whitman continued, even if it that connection, as he would later write to her, existed because “...your dear fingers would press – your sweet eyes dwell upon characters which I had penned – characters which had welled out upon the paper from the depths of so devout a love...”

At one point during his incognito courtship, Poe found out that Helen Whitman was not married. It is likely that he received this information from Anna Blackwell, a British poet to whom he had written the following letter on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1848:

Do you know Mrs. Whitman? I feel deep interest in her poetry and character. I have never seen her — but once — Her poetry is, beyond question, poetry, instinct with genius. Can you not tell me something about her — anything — everything you know — and keep my secret — that is to say let no one know that I have asked you to do so?

Blackwell was actually well acquainted with Whitman, whom she had met during her stay in Providence. As should have been expected, she showed Poe’s letter to her friend. Whitman must have then been able to put the clues together to figure out the identity of her admirer, perhaps by comparing the handwriting in the letter addressed to Blackwell, with that in the most recent version of “To Helen.” She eventually decided to acknowledge Poe’s admiration and sent him

several unsigned stanzas of her poem, “A Night in August.” The letter took quite some time to reach Poe, however, as Whitman had mistakenly sent it to Fordham whilst Poe was actually residing in Richmond. It thus remained unclaimed for several weeks at the post office until Poe’s aunt, Maria Clemm, eventually forwarded it to Richmond.

In the meantime, Whitman received a third letter from Poe in September 1848. This time, Poe had signed the letter as “Edward S. T. Grey,” a pseudonym derived from the names of his favorite authors; namely, Edward Blouwer-Lytton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Gray:

Dear Madam —

Being engaged in making a collection of autographs of the most distinguished American authors, I am, of course, anxious to procure your own, and if you would so far honor me as to reply, however briefly, to this note, I would take it as a very especial favor.

Resy Yr mo. ob. st  
Edward S. T. Grey.

When Poe finally received the letter forwarded from his aunt in Fordham, he decided a trip to Providence was due. Perhaps the following stanza from Whitman’s poem gave Poe the impression that his feelings for the poetess were to be reciprocated:

Through all the dusk and dewy hours,  
The banded stars above,  
Are singing, in their airy towers,  
The melodies of love;

### **September 21<sup>st</sup> 1848**

The sound of heavy hooves and creaky wagon wheels came to a halt outside the house at 76 Benefit Street. Soon enough, Helen Whitman heard a knock at the front door and felt her face grow pale. She hesitated before getting up from her seat in the parlor and stood by the closed wooden door, fumbling with the key. If her sister or mother were around, she would have

muttered something incomprehensible about expecting a visitor, for she suddenly found herself unable to think properly or string words together. The question she had been suppressing all afternoon fluttered across her mind: did she really want to marry again? Her previous marriage was laden with anxieties and John's death had almost been a relief. She brought an ether-soaked napkin to her face and inhaled deeply.

Outside the pedimented doorway stood Edgar Allan Poe. It must have felt surreal to be back at the house where Helen Whitman's vision had enchanted him three years ago. His health had deteriorated since then. Plagued by fatigue and vertigo he stood shorter than his usual height of five foot eight, as he waited for the closed door to open at any moment. In his left hand he held a letter of introduction from his friend, the Georgian novelist Maria Jane McIntosh. "I feel much obliged to Mr. Poe," she had written in the letter addressed to Whitman, "for permitting me thus to associate myself with an incident so agreeable to both of you, as I feel persuaded your first meeting will prove."

## **Epilogue**

Edgar Allan Poe and Helen Whitman became well acquainted during their first three days together. They spent these days discussing literature against a series of Providence backdrops, including the Athenaeum on Benefit Street and the lush gardens of the Swan Point Cemetery. Although Whitman resisted for some time, she eventually accepted Poe's insistent marriage proposals in November 1848. The engagement was conditional, however, as Poe promised to remain sober and "never again to taste wine."

On December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1848, a mere two days before the wedding was to take place, Poe and Whitman were at the Athenaeum when Whitman received a note from an anonymous correspondent. The note recounted details of Poe's past of which Whitman had been unaware and indicated that Poe had broken his promise about drinking. Whitman immediately called off the wedding. Perhaps she realized the degree of Poe's emotional instability and was finally convinced by her mother, who disapproved greatly of Poe and their engagement. That same day, Poe left by train to Connecticut and took a steamboat to New York. Even after the engagement was broken off, newspapers continued publishing announcements and congratulatory notices for their wedding. One newspaper even went so far as to wish the couple "a house-full of very fat babies." But Poe would never return to Providence or see Helen Whitman again.

Despite the troubling end to their relationship and Poe's engagement to Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton soon after, Helen Whitman remained affectionate towards Poe and held him in high regard. When Poe's enemies launched a fresh war against him after his death in October 1849, Whitman consistently fought back to protect his name. She dedicated much of her later life to contradicting the works of Rufus Wilmot Griswold. Not only had Griswold penned an unimaginably malicious obituary for Poe, which read, "Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it," but he wrote a defamatory memoir and bibliography on Poe as well. After almost a decade of work and correspondence with various editors, Whitman succeeded in publishing "Edgar Allan Poe and his Critics" in 1850 to do justice to the reputation of the deceased poet and writer.

Sarah Helen Whitman passed away on June 27<sup>th</sup> 1878, aged seventy-five, at 97 Bowen Street in Providence. Survived by her sister at the time of her death, she left all her money to foundations for the protection of colored children and the prevention of cruelty against animals. Today, her name exists mainly in the context of Edgar Allan Poe. When she was alive, however, Whitman was a well-regarded poet and writer. She wrote essay after essay on the topics of feminism and spiritualism, published a collection of poems titled "Hours of Life, and Other Poems," and was a writer for the *Providence Daily Journal*. Today, only "Edgar Allan Poe and his Critics," remains in print. For those who know Helen Whitman's story, she exists in history very much as her own person and continues to walk the streets of Providence, be it to the house that still stands on Benefit Street or the Athenaeum Library where her portrait hangs.

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