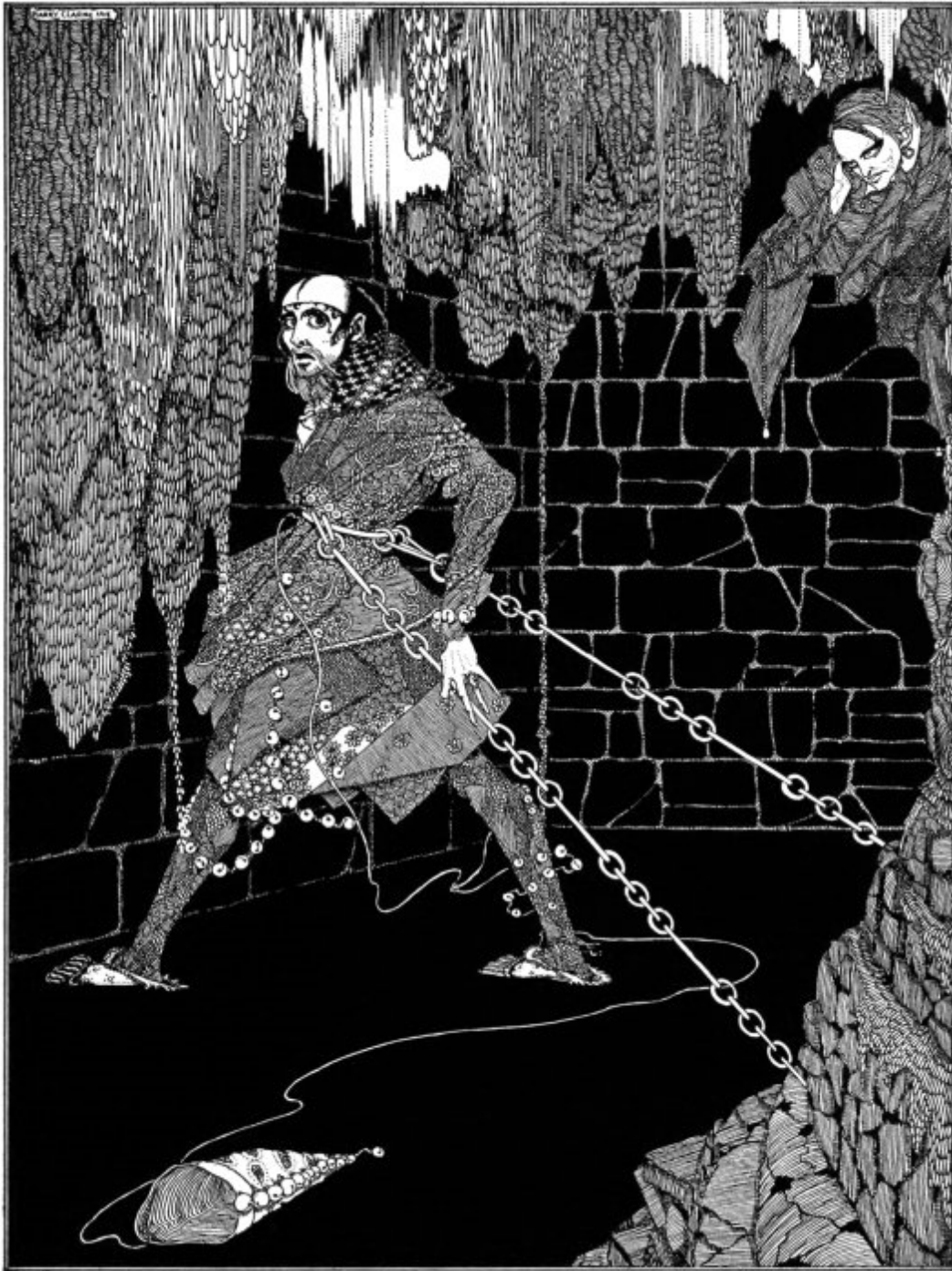


The Cask of Amontillado



Edgar Allan Poe

An Annotated™ Edition

“The Cask of Amontillado”

by

Edgar Allan Poe

An Authoritative Text

Edited by

J. Commander

Executive Director of Annotated™



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For Kristl, Tom, Peter, and Susan

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Things To Know Before Reading . . .

“The Cask of Amontillado”

“The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) was written by **Edgar Allan Poe** (1809-1849), an American poet, fiction writer, and literary critic whose own death is as mysterious and bizarre as any he assigned to his characters. Though initially known primarily as a reviewer for his unapologetically harsh critiques of other writers' works, Poe became a household name and recognized as an accomplished poet upon his publication of “The Raven” in 1845. Harnessing the power of his newfound fame, Poe detailed how masterful writing is successfully consummated in his 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” a philosophy which finds full realization in a story he published shortly thereafter: “The Cask of Amontillado.”

“The Cask of Amontillado's” temporal **setting** is twofold: its *narrative* time (the time during which the recounted tale *takes place*) and its *narrated* time (the time during which the tale *is told*). The story that Montresor tells his listener takes place 50 years before Montresor's present; if we are to assume that the publication year of the story (1846) is roughly the time in which Montresor narrates the story, then his narrative takes place in the late 18th century. The narrative setting includes outside and within Montresor's ancestral home in an Italian city during **Carnival**, a Roman Catholic festival during which people are encouraged to let go of their inhibitions before they have to sacrifice their desires during **Lent** (a period of abstinence and penitence). Wearing masks and costumes further safeguarded individuals from being recognized (and therefore from being held accountable) for indulging in their illicit desires. The narrated setting is open to speculation, but takes place half a century after the events described in Montresor's story.

Montresor and Fortunato are apparently **Freemasons**. Inspired and influenced by the medieval stonemason guilds, freemasonry is a secret fraternal organization that arose in England in the early eighteenth century and swiftly spread to other European countries and America. This all-male secret society was widely associated with intrigue during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pamphlets by the organization's detractors claimed that masons practiced esoteric and licentious rituals behind closed doors, which in turn became a popular trope of gothic literature.

Amontillado is an expensive dry sherry produced in the Spanish town of Montilla.

Things to Consider While Reading . . .

“The Cask of Amontillado”

- What role does Amontillado actually play in the story?
- Is “The Cask of Amontillado” a tale of revenge, sacrifice, or both?
- How does symbolism function in “The Cask of Amontillado”?
- What might be the nature of the injuries and insults that Montresor claims Fortunato committed against him?
- How might Montresor's and Fortunato's involvement in freemasonry affect the outcome of the story? How does the story's setting affect its outcome?
- What is the significance of the other characters in “The Cask of Amontillado” who are mentioned but do not actually appear?
- Whom might Montresor be telling his story to? What insight into the story could the identification of that person afford?
- Is Montresor a reliable narrator?
- How does the manner in which Montresor recounts his story provide insight on his feelings about it? Is he remorseful? Is he proud? What might be his purpose for telling it?

A Note on the Text

“The Cask of Amontillado” was originally published in the November 1846 issue of *Godey's Lady Book* (also known as *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*), a popular women's periodical based out of Philadelphia that ran from 1830 to 1878. The only other version of “The Cask of Amontillado” authorized by Poe before his death was published in the first volume of *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1815-1857) and first printed in January of 1850. Annotated's edition uses the original publication as its base text, though the variants found in Griswold's edition are also included in our critical edition of “The Cask of Amontillado” (available for download at AnnotatedLibrary.org).

The Cask of Amontillado

by Edgar A. Poe

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato¹ I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled — but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont,² to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.³

He had a weak point — this Fortunato — although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself upon his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and gemmery,⁴ Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack,⁵ but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially; — I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season,⁶ that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells.⁷ I was so pleased to see him that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

I said to him — “My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are

1 *Fortunato*: “the fortunate one” (Italian).

2 *wont*: custom or habitual inclination.

3 *immolation*: the general meaning of this term refers to a sacrifice usually by fire, but J. Commander argues that Poe's usage of the term also harnesses its Latin root's connotative and denotative meanings. See “For the Love of God!": Montresor's Sacrificial Gesture of Abstinence in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado.'”

4 *gemmary*: here used to refer to expertise in gems, though the term's meaning as a noun usually refers to a jeweller or engraver of gems (whereas its adjectival meaning is simply “pertaining to gems”).

5 *quack*: impostor.

6 *carnival season*: a festive season that immediately preceded Lent in Roman Catholic countries where Catholics were socially sanctioned to indulge in “sins of the flesh” before submitting to the Lentian period of abstinence and penitence beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending near Easter. To avoid censorious repercussions from their riotous exploits, revelers usually disguised their identities by wearing costumes and masks.

7 *motley* . . . *bells*: Fortunato is costumed as a court jester. *motley*: multicolored attire.

looking to-day. But I have received a pipe⁸ of what passes for Amontillado,⁹ and I have my doubts.”

“How?” said he. “Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!”

“I have my doubts,” I replied; “and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain.”

“Amontillado!”

“I have my doubts.”

“Amontillado!”

“And I must satisfy them.”

“Amontillado!”

“As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchresi.¹⁰ If any one has a critical turn it is he. He will tell me ——”

“Luchresi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry.”

“And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own.”

“Come, let us go.”

“Whither?”

“To your vaults.”

“My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchresi ——”

“I have no engagement; — come.”

“My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre.¹¹”

“Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed upon. And as for Luchresi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado.”

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm; and putting on a mask of black silk and drawing a *roquelaire*¹² closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.¹³

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honour of the time. I

8 *pipe*: a wine barrel with a 126-gallon capacity.

9 *Amontillado*: an expensive variety of sherry produced in Montilla, a town in southern Spain.

10 *Luchresi*: Luchresi's name seems to reflect his economic status by its similarity to the term *lucre* (meaning “profit” or “pecuniary advantage”). Like Fortunato, Luchresi is apparently a prominent Italian aristocrat with considerable wealth. Subsequent versions of the text replace Luchresi with *Luchesi*, and Kevin J. Hayes claims in *The Annotated Poe* that Poe uses that name to make a private reference to his contemporary Frederick Lucchesi, a Baltimore musician.

11 *nitre*: potassium nitrate, more commonly known as saltpeter, which is the primary constituent in gunpowder.

12 *mask of black silk . . . roquelaire*: though Montresor's nondescript attire is not readily identifiable of any particular costume, its rich material and absence of color conjures up associations of mystery and intrigue and starkly contrasts Fortunato's motley. *roquelaire*: a knee-length, silk-lined, and fur-trimmed cloak with a cape collar fashionable among male nobility during the 18th century.

13 *palazzo*: palatial mansion (Italian).

had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

I took from their sconces two flambeaux,¹⁴ and giving one to Fortunato, bowed him through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults. I passed down a long and winding staircase, requesting him to be cautious as he followed. We came at length to the foot of the descent, and stood together upon the damp ground of the catacombs¹⁵ of the Montresors.¹⁶

The gait of my friend was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode.

“The pipe,” said he.

“It is farther on,” said I; “but observe the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls.”

He turned towards me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum¹⁷ of intoxication.

“Nitre?” he asked, at length.

“Nitre,” I replied. “How long have you had that cough?”

“Ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh!”

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

“It is nothing,” he said, at last.

“Come,” I said, with decision, “we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchresi —”

“Enough,” he said; “the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough.”

“True — true,” I replied; “and, indeed, I had no intention of alarming you unnecessarily — but you should use all proper caution. A draught of this Medoc¹⁸ will defend us from the damp.”

Here I knocked off the neck of a bottle which I drew from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mould.

“Drink,” I said, presenting him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a leer.¹⁹ He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells

14 *flambeaux*: lighted torches.

15 *catacombs*: a hereditary estate's subterranean crypt.

16 *Montresors*: Montresor's name is a multilayered one. If separated to form *mon tresor*, it is French for “my treasure”; *montres*, on the other hand, is French for “watches” or “shows.” Though the extent of Montresor's catacombs indicates that his family has resided in Italy for several generations, the etymology of his name suggests that his ancestral and cultural heritage is French and not Italian.

17 *rheum*: a watery discharge from the eyes or nose, once believed to be a mucous that originated from the brain and carried disease.

18 *Medoc*: a red wine produced in the Médoc region of France.

19 *leer*: a side glance evocative of slyness or lasciviousness. The sexual connotations usually associated with this

jingled.

“I drink,” he said, “to the buried that repose around us.”

“And I to your long life.”

He again took my arm, and we proceeded.

“These vaults,” he said, “are extensive.”

“The Montresors,” I replied, “were a great and numerous family.”

“I forget your arms.”

“A huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel.”²⁰

“And the motto?”

“*Nemo me impune lacessit.*”²¹

“Good!” he said.

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc. We had passed through long walls of piled skeletons, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. I paused again, and this time I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow.

“The nitre!” I said: “see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river’s bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere²² it is too late. Your cough ——”

“It is nothing,” he said; “let us go on. But first, another draught of the Medoc.”

I broke and reached him a flacon of De Grâve.²³ He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upwards with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement — a grotesque one.

“You do not comprehend?” he said.

“Not I,” I replied.

“Then you are not of the brotherhood.”

“How?”

term renders Poe's use of it here rather conspicuous.

20 *A huge human foot . . . heel*: Montresor's coat of arms portrays a sky-colored background with a serpent whose fangs are embedded in the heel of a huge golden foot which stomps upon it in the foreground. The image calls to mind *lex talionis* justice (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth), which is echoed by the crest's motto. Montresor's arms also recalls Yahweh's declaration to the serpent in Genesis 3:15 (“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel”).

21 *Nemo me impune lacessit*: “No one wounds me with impunity” (Latin), which was also the motto of Scotland's Stuart dynasty. Poe may possibly have encountered the phrase in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), a novel by his contemporary James Fenimore Cooper (1759-1851).

22 *ere*: before.

23 *De Grâve*: wine from Graves, a subregion of the famous Bordeaux wine region in France.

“You are not of the masons.”²⁴

“Yes, yes,” I said; “yes, yes.”

“You? Impossible! A mason?”

“A mason,” I replied.

“A sign,” he said, “a sign.”

“It is this,” I answered, producing from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire* a trowel.²⁵

“You jest,” he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. “But let us proceed to the Amontillado.”

“Be it so,”²⁶ I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak and again offering him my arm. He leaned upon it heavily. We continued our route in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris.²⁷ Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth side the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior crypt or recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite.

It was in vain that Fortunato, uplifting his dull torch, endeavoured to pry into the depths of the recess. Its termination the feeble light did not enable us to see.

“Proceed,” I said; “herein is the Amontillado. As for Luchresi ——”

“He is an ignoramus,” interrupted my friend, as he stepped unsteadily forward, while I followed immediately at his heels. In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche, and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered. A moment more and I had fettered him to the granite. In its surface were two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet, horizontally. From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock. Throwing

24 *brotherhood . . . masons*: inspired and influenced by the medieval stonemason guilds, freemasonry is a secret fraternal organization that arose in England in the early eighteenth century and swiftly spread to other European countries and America. The all-male secret society was widely associated with intrigue during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pamphlets by the organization's detractors claimed that masons practiced esoteric and licentious rituals behind closed doors, which in turn became a popular trope of gothic literature.

25 *It is this . . . a trowel*: critics have traditionally assumed that Montresor is not a mason since he apparently does not recognize Fortunato's sign, but it is evident from the text that Montresor feigns confusion in order to set up his extra-literal joke—the meaning of which Fortunato does not fully comprehend nor anticipate due to his inebriation.

26 *Be it so*: Montresor's declarative affirmation to Fortunato's request here echoes how “Amen,” which means “so be it,” is traditionally used in Judeo-Christian ritual.

27 *great catacombs of Paris*: the famous labyrinthine crypt constructed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries residing beneath the French capital.

the links about his waist, it was but the work of a few seconds to secure it. He was too much astounded to resist. Withdrawing the key I stepped back from the recess.

“Pass your hand,” I said, “over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed, it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I will positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power.”

“The Amontillado!” ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

“True,” I replied; “the Amontillado.”

As I said these words I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche.

I had scarcely laid the first tier of my masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibration of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labours and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated, I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier,²⁸ I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed — I aided — I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still.

It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognising as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said —

“Ha! ha! ha! — he! he! he! — a very good joke, indeed — an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo — he! he! he! — over our wine — he! he! he!”

“The Amontillado!” I said.

“He! he! he! — he! he! he! — yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo — the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone.”

“Yes,” I said, “let us be gone.”

“*For the love of God, Montresor!*”

28 *rapier*: a long, thin sword worn by gentlemen of the period commonly used in duels.

“Yes,” I said, “for the love of God!”

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud —

“Fortunato!”

No answer. I called again —

“Fortunato!” No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so. I hastened to make an end of my labour. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*²⁹

²⁹ *In pace requiescat*: “May he rest in peace” (Latin), the final words of a Requiem Mass.

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