

*George Greene*

## THE REVENGE OF MR. POE

BLACK MARY came originally from the state of Maine, but this was information I never volunteered because, compared with other facts, equally verifiable, it sounded pedestrian. It was more satisfying to watch her great eyebrows descend menacingly, glistening like trimmed foxes' tails, then remind myself she was half Indian, so that a request to empty the bathtub Saturday night never lapsed into routine. It was always possible Black Mary might creep down to the pantry, brushing aside mother, then lunge upstairs and scalp everyone in sight.

When I was in the first grade Black Mary accompanied me mornings as far as Highland Street, chewing discreetly on the wad of snuff which, so far as I could determine, was her substitute for breakfast. During her escort duty it was impossible not to hear the asides of other children. Black Mary presented occasions for puzzlement, even among credulous first graders—her lean body planted firmly in low-heeled shoes, the old beret stuck flatly over her hair, graying even then, though she couldn't have been more than forty, the scout-like fixation on some object visible only to herself.

I did not get along well with most of my classmates, who were forever forcing smaller children to perform as horses during recess. Sometimes they were knights in armour and sometimes Chicago gangsters, and I could never comprehend why they insisted on horses whether they were Charlemagne or Capone. After a hectic day dodging Tommy Agvapian, most relentless organizer of these entertainments, I would bolt toward the figure under the red light, whisper "good afternoon, Mary," and we would retrace our trail homeward like a beleaguered patrol.

Black Mary and I shared the same room, her narrow bed between mine and the window. For the longest time I was full of the notion that the former owner of our house, to whom I had given, quite arbitrarily, the name Edgar Allan Poe, was trying to break in. On rainy weekends I would undertake to outwit Mr. Poe.

Once I pierced the plastered inside walls of my closet with a wire, expecting to come upon a metal box with sheaves of cryptic letters. I had carefully pushed aside winter clothes in a large moth bag and was busy at work when there was a noise.

"What are you up to?"

I stood up quickly, my hands white with plaster, moving away from the confines of the door. Suddenly the thought struck me that my parents were out of the house. "I was looking for something," I said, cautiously. The hard stare was enough to convince me I couldn't prey upon Black Mary's sense of adventure.

The next thing I knew she had left the room, and I was standing alone, pressing my face absently against the window pane. Old Zelda, who had preceded Black Mary, always slapped one into some foolish story, which she later retailed as proof of the impossibility of her job. It couldn't have been more than a minute when Mary returned. In one hand she held a dustpan and brush, in the other a wide-bladed bread knife. "Clean it up." She waved the dustpan in front of my face, the knife clenched in her other hand, close to her side. I was more surprised than anything else until I saw her eyes. They seemed to penetrate one, through and through, then return upon themselves, having found nothing.

Later that spring I was plagued with a head cold. It cleared up quickly, only to leave me with a throat that was painless, but which made it difficult to talk. I sat in bed, copying illustrations from history books I had found downstairs, then passing them off as original when my father came for a visit.

Every day Black Mary would carry my discarded work to school, offering *The Landing of the Pilgrims* or *Last Stand at the Alamo* as evidence I had not been idle. It embarrassed me to think of her walking around the corridors, neglecting jokes about her coarse brown stockings. Near people like Tommy Agvagian, she would discover that I had never found success as a rider—that it was my legitimate doom to serve as a horse.

One night I awoke feeling thirsty. I had no idea of the time, and the strange sensation of coming back to consciousness made me want to pause. Everything had that strange sense of motion, of wild yet unafrightening revelation, one associates with two o'clock on a May morning.

At first I thought it was a window shade banging. Then whatever it was moved again. Something brushed against the closet door and, opening my eyes, I made out Black Mary. She rose silently, an object in her hand, then tilted her head backward. Replacing the object, she closed the door, deliberately, and I sensed that she knew someone else was awake.

I heard the shuffle of bare feet, and through half-closed eyelids I could see Black Mary on the edge of her bed. She waited, expecting me to speak.

"What time is it?"

"It's after midnight," she said. When she was chewing snuff Mary talked strangely, but this was something else. Whatever it was made her words slower, darker, giving them a quality of indefinable melancholy.

"I have to get a glass of water."

"You wait one second," Black Mary said, and then she was gone to the bathroom. Returning, she sat near me. I could feel the warmth of her hand on the glass. She patted my feet, and I wondered if this were how even brave people acted in the remote, unlit hours.

"You feel all right, Mary?"

"Don't you bother." In the obscurity I couldn't make out her face, but I felt that it, like her voice, had become confused. I was calculating how much I might rely on this new gentleness.

"When I can't sleep I take medicine." She moved heavily, concluding our talk. I emptied the glass and leaned sideways so that we could whisper.

"Is it your throat?"

"Don't fret none," she repeated, this time with a suppressed laugh. I had never thought of Black Mary laughing, and I took advantage of the opportunity to swing my legs to the floor.

"I have to go."

"Don't you tell," Mary reminded me. Ordinarily she would have made me wear slippers and bathrobe. I hesitated, but her eyes were closed now. One hand moved back and forth irresolutely outside the covers.

"I won't say anything."

I lay in bed, trying to reconcile this unfamiliar softness with the scrutiny of the brown eyes. After a while I heard snoring, and every few minutes a breeze would attack the window shades. I found myself timing the slow insurge of air, followed by the dry, cracking sound of shade against window pane. There had been something disappointing in the pressure against my legs, the way in which she had pleaded for silence.

I resented the necessity to make room for this new view, one which failed to take into account the heavy scowl, the unconquerable vitality. Oddly enough, I felt no urge to investigate the closet. Whatever it was remained in the moth bag,

but I turned instinctively away. It belonged with the unstable lies about my ventures at recess—it gave one the same desire to put it out of mind.

Black Mary surprised the household by catching my virus, and Doctor Tunison spent a long time checking her. When he finally emerged I was lingering on the top step, where I could watch my mother and him. They mentioned snuff, but from the way the doctor smiled it was clear there wasn't anything serious. He saw me, and he must have felt that I wanted news.

"Your pal will be jumping in a day or two." He rubbed my head. It was part of Doctor Tunison's psychology to address children as adults. "We're going to have you sleep alone, old man," he went on. I suspected a reference to my fear of the dark.

In the silence Black Mary's bed stood rigid, focussing on itself all the animation in the room. "He gave me a shot," Mary said with that wonderful capacity to dismiss horrible things. But I noticed her eyes, which seemed unable to stay open.

"Did it hurt much?"

"Nothing to bother about." Black Mary wet her lips, turning in my direction. It unsettled me to watch her. I wondered if I should read her a story about the old frontier. Lying in bed, she reminded me uncomfortably of the others in the house, with our regulated diet, our campaign against germs, our pale skin.

"I'm sleeping upstairs."

"You don't need to be afraid," she said. This time, though, it lacked the authority of swinging arms.

Black Mary sneezed, following which she blinked weakly. Then she revived a characteristic scowl that made things familiar. "What I need," she whispered for the first time, "is a little real medicine." The brown eyes pursued me now with customary alertness.

"You want me to get it?" My voice followed hers into hiding.

"My arm's starting to hurt."

Checking the door without being told, I located the brightly labelled bottle at the bottom of the moth bag, and Mary slid it deftly under the covers. When my mother returned we were talking at the top of our voices about whether the pillows needed airing. I felt cheated because I did not experience customary pleasure at being involved in trickery.

The next afternoon, when I returned from school, I found Black Mary depressed. She sat in bed, gaunt and passive, while my mother arranged flowers that

Mary would never look at anyway. I examined the brown syrup Doctor Tunison had left: it hadn't even been opened. I often asked myself, afterwards, whether Edgar Allan Poe could have had something to do with it. It might have been his scheme to get back at me. For I decided, then and there, to get rid of the source of Mary's depleted strength.

At supper time an opportunity presented itself. Everyone else was downstairs. Black Mary had paddled to the bathroom, her feet resolutely free from the slippers my mother insisted she wear. I had been poised, unnoticed, at the curve of the staircase leading to the top floor. The moth bag contained two bottles: I felt half a dozen empties dispersed in various coat pockets.

I wrapped the two in a towel, then shut the door just as I had rehearsed it. I felt uneasy spying on Black Mary. At the same time I couldn't help sensing it was better than the secret files of Mr. Poe. This had a basis in real danger as well as the prospect of performing a good deed.

There was no one in the hall. My stockinged feet skipped up the stairs two at a time. I arranged the bottles, each in its private towel now to prevent noise, under the unused sofa that stood beneath the trap door to the attic. As a decoy I took a broom and, standing on the radiator, pushed upward gently on this door. Anyone coming this way, I told myself, would suppose the evidence hidden in the attic.

The next day at school I felt exhausted. I had twisted for hours, watching the unfamiliar curtains of the guest room. I fully expected to hear bare feet paddling outside, gradually reaching my door. At recess I deliberately sought out Tommy Agvagian, who was engaged in preliminaries for a tournament. He reached toward me before I had a chance to speak. The action surprised me so that, anxious as I was to relate my exciting deed, I lunged automatically. "Get another horse!"

Tommy's eyes gleamed with nervous malice. "So you figure to operate like a big guy!" It was not in the nature of things to revolt. No one affected surprise at my untoward push, any more than they would be aroused to attack me.

"I want to tell my adventure!" My mission of mercy was so graphic in my mind I didn't notice Tommy's foot. He caught me above the shoes, then pushed with his right hand, laughing tensely to show that, were I docile, the incident would not be entered against me.

Something, whether my unrecognized exploit or his refusal to give audience, blinded me. I grabbed Tommy from a kneeling position. Before he had time for one of his kicks, I had thrown him down and was sticking my fist in his face. "Let me tell you!" I kept screaming, panting from the exhaustion of my emotion. "Let

me tell you!" I kicked, bit, grunted, my eyes blinded with dirt and tears, my shirt torn down the back. Between the squeals of fury I caught Tommy's voice, yelling words I had never heard. There was something fetid in their sound. I jabbed furiously at his mouth, twisting and spitting like a snake being stoned.

I thought Tommy's gang were lifting me, and I clenched his sweat shirt as hands forced me upward. Ignorant of what they meant, I repeated his words, with their mysterious easing of guilt. I was inside before I realized it was Mr. Dodge, the principal, holding me. His office was acquainted with the activities of Tommy. No one inquired about the origin of our misunderstanding, or about my language. We were dismissed in opposite directions, and told to appear with one of our parents the next day.

I entered the house to find my mother, who had obviously heard about my conduct by phone. Whether I was trying to renounce the mission of mercy and the schoolyard language, as soon as I saw her I began crying. I crept upstairs, coolly silent in the late morning, and spent time in a tub of warm water. At lunch my mother seemed disinclined to question me. I felt guilty under the weight of her eyes—guilty, too, that I could eat with such appetite. Finally, as if her conscience had been provoking her, she spoke: "It wasn't your fault, was it?"

I looked up, glad to explain. "I wanted to tell something, and he wouldn't listen." I fumbled with my spoon, reminding myself I couldn't discuss what I had planned to say.

When it was clear I would reveal nothing more, my mother continued: "I'll see Mr. Dodge tomorrow."

"Anyone can tell you what happened." I was not presenting an adequate case. Remembering Tommy's well-trained knights, I did not have confidence.

My mother watched me. "I'll walk to school with you myself," she said. Her tone made me start. Anticipating me, she went on: "I had to close the attic door this morning."

"I didn't open it," I lied nervously.

"It doesn't matter." She shook her head with exaggerated motion. "I used the ladder from the closet—I had to move that old sofa to get close enough."

For some reason I didn't care about covering my tracks: it required more skill than I could command. Loneliness spread like the sensation of Sunday afternoon at the close of vacation. I had failed upstairs just as miserably as against Charlemagne's cavalry—I was not ready for adult intrigue. The trap door burdened me like the unconsidered first thought it really was. I had mixed make-believe with

actuality. In this other world you could not take back anything, reverting to your original place to start the game once more. I said flatly, as if making up for an earlier slight: "How's Black Mary?"

My mother made a point of looking me square in the eyes. "I didn't want to bring that up," she said, refilling my glass. "Mary went to the hospital this morning."

"When is she coming home?"

"I couldn't really say." She tried not to hesitate. "Mary was sicker than we thought."