

Fortunato has voiced an insult one too many times. Little does he know that Montresor takes revenge seriously. And revenge is even sweeter when a person least expects it.

The Cask of Amontillado

Over the years, I had stood the thousand wrongs of Fortunato as I best could. But when he insulted me, I vowed revenge. However, you know the nature of my soul well. You will know that I never uttered a threat. *Sooner or later*, I would be **avenged**—this was a point definitely settled. But the very certainty with which it was decided ruled out the idea of risk.

I must not only punish, but punish without being punished myself. A wrong is not paid back when **retribution** overtakes its avenger. It is also unpaid when the avenger fails to make himself known to him who has done the wrong.

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given myself away. Fortunato had no cause to doubt my goodwill. I continued, as usual, to smile in his face. He did not see that my smile now was at the thought of his destruction.

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other ways, he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on being an expert in wine. Few Italians have the true spirit of genius at this. For the most part, their enjoyment of wine is merely suited to the time and opportunity. Their purpose is to trick British and Austrian millionaires.

In paintings and the study of gems, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack.¹ But in the matter of old wines, he was the real thing. And in this way, I did not differ from him very much. I knew about Italian wines myself and bought them whenever I could.

It was about dusk one evening during the greatest madness of Carnival.² I met my friend. He approached me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much.

The man wore the costume of a jester.³ He had on a tight-fitting striped dress. On top of his head was a pointed cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him that I thought I should never finish wringing his hand.

I said to him, "My dear Fortunato, I'm so lucky to meet you! How remarkably well you look today! I have received a **cask** of what passes for Amontillado.⁴ And I have my doubts about whether it truly is Amontillado or not."

"How?" asked Fortunato. "Amontillado? A cask? Impossible! And in the middle of Carnival!"

"As I said, I have my doubts," I replied. "And I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without **consulting** you. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!" Fortunato exclaimed.

"I have my doubts," I replied.

"Amontillado!" he repeated.

"And I must satisfy them," I said.

"Amontillado!"

¹ A quack is someone who falsely passes himself or herself off as an expert.

² In Italy, Carnival is a celebration with costumes, dancing, food, and drink.

³ A jester is a costumed clown or comedian who usually performs for kings or nobility.

⁴ Amontillado is a Spanish wine.

"Since you are busy, I am on my way to see Luchesi," I said. "If anyone knows his wines, it is he. He will tell me—"

"Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry," Fortunato interrupted.

"And yet some fools would say that his taste is a match for your own," I challenged.

"Come, let us go," he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"To your vaults,"⁵ Fortunato answered.

"My friend, no. I will not **impose** upon your good nature. I know you are on your way to meet someone. Luchesi—"

"I am meeting no one. Come," Fortunato once again interrupted.

"My friend, no. It is not that. But I see that you are suffering in the severe cold. The vaults are unbearably damp," I cautioned. "They are encrusted with nitre."⁶

"Let us go, nevertheless," Fortunato said. "The cold is nothing. Amontillado!"

Thus speaking, Fortunato took my arm. I put on a mask of black silk and drew a cloak close around me. He hurried me to my palazzo.⁷

There were no servants at home. They had run away to make merry in honor of the holiday. I had told them that I should not return until the morning. And I had given them **explicit** orders not to stir from the house. These orders were enough, I knew, to ensure their disappearance. They were gone, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

I took two torches from their holders and gave one to Fortunato. I guided him through several groups of rooms to the archway that led to the vault. I passed down a long and winding staircase, warning him to be careful as he followed. We finally came to the bottom of our climb. We

⁵ A vault is a room with arched walls and ceiling, often underground.

⁶ Nitre is sodium nitrate. The presence of nitre on the walls of the vaults shows that the walls are extremely damp.

⁷ A palazzo is a large house.

stood together on the damp ground of the catacombs⁸ that belonged to my family, the Montresors.

My friend's step was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he walked.

"The cask?" he asked.

"It is farther on," I said. "But see the white webwork that gleams from these cavern walls."

He turned toward me and looked into my eyes. His misty eyes dribbled the tears 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 I once 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 to blame. Besides, there is Luchesi—"

"Enough," he said. "The cough is nothing. It will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough."

"True—true," I replied. "And indeed I did not mean to alarm you unnecessarily. But you should use proper caution. A drink of this Medoc⁹ will defend us from the damps."

At this point, I drew a bottle from a long row of its fellows. I knocked off the neck of the bottle.

"Drink," I said, giving him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a **leer**. He paused and nodded to me in a familiar way while his bells jingled.

"I drink," he said, "to the buried that rest around us."

"And I drink to your long life," I replied.

He took my arm again, and we went on.

"These vaults are very large," he noticed.

"The Montresors were a great and large family."

⁸ Catacombs are underground tunnels often used for burying the dead.

⁹ Medoc is a red wine from the Bordeaux region of France.

"I forget your coat of arms,"¹⁰ he said.

"A huge human foot of gold on a field of blue. The foot crushes a raging serpent, whose fangs are imbedded in the heel," I described.

"And your motto?"

"*Nemo me impune lacessit.*"¹¹

"Good!" he said.

The wine sparkled in his eyes, and the bells jingled on his head. My own imagination grew warm with the Medoc. We had passed through walls of piled bones mixed with large and small casks. We reached the inner recesses of the catacombs.

"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 before it is too late. Your cough—"

"It is nothing," he insisted. "Let us go on. But first, another drink of the Medoc."

I broke a bottle of de Grâve¹² and handed it to him. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upward with a motion I did not understand.

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

"You do not understand?" he said.

"Not I," I replied.

"Then you are not of the brotherhood," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You are not of the Masons."¹³

"Oh yes, yes," I said. "Yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A Mason?"

"A Mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said.

¹⁰ A coat of arms is a family seal or emblem.

¹¹ *Nemo me impune lacessit* means "No one insults me without punishment" in Latin.

¹² De Grâve is a Bordeaux wine.

¹³ Fortunato is referring to the Freemasons, an international organization with secret rites and signs.

"It is this," I answered. I produced a trowel¹⁴ from beneath the folds of my cloak.

"You jest!" he exclaimed, **recoiling** a few paces. "But let us go on to the Amontillado."

"Be it so," I said, replacing the tool beneath my cloak. I offered him my arm, and he leaned upon it heavily. We continued on our way in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches. We descended, walked a ways, and descended again, arriving at a deep crypt.¹⁵ Here the foulness of the air caused our torches to glow rather than flame.

At the far end of the crypt was another smaller one. Its walls had been lined with human remains. They were piled up to the vault overhead in the style of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still decorated in this manner. From the fourth side, the bones had been thrown down. The bones lay scattered upon the earth, forming a mound of some size.

A wall was exposed by the removal of the bones. Inside it, we saw still another space. It was about four feet deep, three wide, and six or seven high. It seemed to have been built for no special use. It was merely the space between two of the huge supports of the roof. It was backed by a wall of solid granite.¹⁶

Fortunato lifted up his dull torch. But it was in vain that he tried to see into the depths of the recess. The **feeble** light did not let us see its end.

"Go on," I said. "In here is the Amontillado. As for Luchesi—"

"He is an **ignoramus**," interrupted my friend. He stepped unsteadily forward. I followed right at his heels. He had reached the end of the space in an instant. Finding his progress stopped by the rock, he stood, stupidly confused.

A moment more, and I had chained him to the granite. In its surface were two iron staples. They were about two feet apart from each other. From one of these staples

¹⁴ A trowel is a hand tool with a flat blade.

¹⁵ A crypt is an underground room that is used as a burial place.

¹⁶ Granite is a hard rock used for building.

hung a short chain; from the other hung a padlock. I threw the links about his waist. It took but a few seconds to fasten it. He was much too shocked to resist. Withdrawing the key, I stepped back from the recess.

"Pass your hand over the wall," I said. "You cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is *very* damp. Once more let me beg you to return. No? Then I shall certainly leave you. But I must first do what little I can to make you feel at home."

"The Amontillado!" cried my friend. He had not yet recovered from his shock.

"True," I replied. "The Amontillado."

As I said these words, I busied myself. I dug among the pile of bones. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a supply of building stone and mortar. I made use of these materials and my trowel. I began to vigorously wall up the entrance of the space.

I had hardly laid the first row of masonry when I discovered that Fortunato's intoxication had mostly worn off. The earliest sign was a low moaning cry from the depths of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man.

Then there was a long and stubborn silence. I laid the second row, and the third, and the fourth. Then I heard the furious shaking of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes. To listen to it with more enjoyment, I stopped my work and sat down upon the bones.

When at last the clanking stopped, I took up my trowel again. I finished the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh rows without interruption. The wall was now nearly level with my chest. I again paused and held the torch over the masonry. It threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

Suddenly a series of loud and shrill screams burst from the throat of the chained form. They drove me back violently. For a brief moment, I hesitated—I trembled.

Unsheathing¹⁷ my sword, I began to **grope** with it about the recess. But a moment's thought reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid material of the catacombs and felt satisfied. I went back to the wall. I replied to the yells of him who cried out. I echoed—I aided—I

¹⁷ A sheath is a sword holder attached to a belt.

surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the caller grew still.

It was not yet midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth levels. I had finished a part of the eleventh—the last. There remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight. I put it partway in its intended place.

But now there came from out of the space a low laugh. It made the hairs on my head stand up. It was followed by a sad voice, one that I had difficulty recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato.

The voice said, "Ha! ha! ha!—hee! hee!—a very good joke indeed. An excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo. Ho! ho! ho!—over our wine—ha! ha! ha!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"Hee! hee! hee!—hee! hee! hee!—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!"

"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"

But to these words I listened 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 opening and let it fall within. Only a jingling of the bells came forth in reply. My heart grew sick—because of the dampness of the catacombs, of course.

I hurried to end my work. I forced the last stone into its position. I plastered it up. Against the new masonry, I replaced the old wall of bones. And for half of a century, no mortal has disturbed them.

*In pace requiescat!*¹⁸

¹⁸ *In pace requiescat* is Latin for "May he rest in peace."