

Disappearance at Mount Sinai

A Pat O'Malley Historical Mystery

Jim Musgrave

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all the Jews in my life who have accepted me as one of them, and to my wife, the loveliest Jewess of all!

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By

Jim Musgrave

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is a work of fiction, and all resemblances to any character, living or dead, are purely coincidental. I want to acknowledge the dear readers of the first Pat O'Malley mystery. Here you go. I hope you enjoy the second read. I'll keep the imagination going as long as you enjoy staying with me! Without you all, I am nothing but a "voice crying in the wilderness."

PROLOGUE: THE KIDNAPPING

Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City, 1866.

Nurse Rachel Levine was the charge nurse on duty. Dr. Letterman was speaking to her on the fourth floor next to the room where Dr. Arthur Mergenthaler was the important patient. His diagnosis was Ulcerative Colitis, but Miss Levine knew this man also suffered from a serious social disorder.

“I don’t care what he tells you. You are not to allow anyone inside that room. We are responsible for his care and safety, and if something were to happen to him, you and I would be cleaning bedpans for the rest of our lives.”

“Yes, Doctor, but he keeps telling me he is a *mazikeen* and I am a daughter of Lilith. What is he talking about, Doctor? He screams when I try to touch him, and he keeps staring straight ahead without blinking. He also has me bring a pan of water for his ritual washing of his hands. He washes them eight times every hour. Is this patient mentally ill as well?” she asked.

“Dr. Mergenthaler is a genius, and most geniuses have certain idiosyncrasies that we just can’t understand. The important thing is to keep him as comfortable as we can while we treat his physical ailment.” Dr. Letterman was a handsome young Union Officer who had just returned from the war. His brown eyes had that far-away cast to them that Nurse Levine had seen in many of these veterans’ eyes. It was as if they knew of suffering that was beyond human comprehension.

“I’m going to be making my rounds, so I want you to watch this room. Don’t allow anyone to visit. I don’t care if they’re medical staff or even family. This is a restricted room, is that clear, Nurse?”

“Yes, Doctor. I understand,” said the nurse, and she turned to leave.

“Call me if anything happens,” said the doctor. “You know how to use the pneumatic phones that I had installed, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know how to use them. Thank you, Doctor,” she said.

Inside the largest hospital room, Nurse Levine observed the patient, Dr. Arthur Mergenthaler. She looked at his chart hanging on the end of the bed. She needed to give him his 10 PM medication. As she was looking at the chart, she heard a distant knocking sound. It was rather loud, but she could not ascertain from where it was emanating.

After about five minutes, Dr. Letterman came into the room. “Do you hear that?” he asked.

“Yes. I wonder what it is,” said Nurse Levine.

“Perhaps you should go downstairs and look outside. The workmen might be doing late repairs on the renovation. These Irish want to get as much money as they can from us.”

“Yes, Doctor,” she said, and she left the room. As she walked down the hall to the staircase, she kept thinking about this Doctor Letterman. Why was he so interested in one patient? Was this Dr. Mergenthaler so important? She had been taught that all Jews were important, and no single man is better than another in the eyes of G_d.

When she reached the bottom floor she could still hear the knocking, but then it stopped. She opened the double doors to 28th Street. She looked up and down the building’s façade, but there was nobody working there. She turned back around and headed up the stairs to her patient’s room.

When she came into the room, Doctor Letterman was not there, but neither was her patient, Dr. Mergenthaler! None of his personal items was missing. Only his person had disappeared.

Suddenly, a small boy crawled from under the bed.

“Why, who are you?” she asked, “And how did you get here?”

“I am invisible, and my name is Seth.”

Nurse Levine ran over to the pneumatic phone hanging on the wall of the room and shouted into it, “Doctor Letterman! Come up to Room 412, stat!”

1 DR. MERGENTHALER'S FAMILY

January 1867, New York City

Where I grew up, in Five Points, we would always call it the “Jews’ Hospital,” as it was indeed called by this name until 1866, when the kidnapping took place. We Irish continued calling this place Jews’ Hospital or even “Hymie Home” because most of us never completely accepted these people into our daily lives. The hospital was located on 28th Street in Manhattan, between 7th and 8th Avenues. It had served the wounded during the Civil War, and many injured during the Draft Riots of 1863 were treated inside its confines, and over 100 were killed just outside.

As I later learned from the Mergenthaler family, it was Arthur who wanted to name the hospital after the place where the Lord of the Jews appeared to Moses and Aaron in the *Hebrew Scriptures*. I had to look the relevant passage up for myself, as I was forbidden as a child to read the “Old Testaments” of these heathen Jews. It read:

And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the Lord, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near the Lord consecrate themselves, lest

the Lord break out against them.’ But Moses said to the Lord, ‘The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds around the mountain and consecrate it.’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them.’ So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

Dr. Arthur Mergenthaler believed that he, like Moses, was destined to lead his people into a better life on earth through his entrepreneurial work in the newly emancipated South. I was to learn a lot about this man, whose body had been snatched from the remodeled Mt. Sinai Hospital on Manhattan Island, without his ever appearing before me in the flesh. Like these Jews’ God *Yahweh*, to me, he was all scripture and no substance, all passion and no flesh, all dreams and no reality. However, finding the enemies of this man became my solipsistic endeavor for that entire year in 1867, and the curious facts of his disappearance were as mesmerizing and motivating as were the personal characteristics of this enigmatic and influential man.

During my infrequent visits to one of his taverns, my elderly father, Robert, would often become enraged at the influx of new immigrants all over New York. He saw them as interlopers in the populace of true believers, we Roman Catholics, and it was the Jews, especially, who received the brunt of his ire. “We work our tails off for an honest wage. In the taverns, sure you find a few laddies blowin’ off steam, but the family comes first, my boy, and don’t you be forgettin’ that you’re Irish, through and through!” That’s when his pet rave about the Jews always began with, “Those demon kikes from hell! They lie, they cheat, and they would sell their own grandmother for gold. Family means nothing to ‘em. It’s the money they lust for, and they’ll do anything for it, don’tcha know?”

I would sometimes joke with da and say, "I don't suppose grandmothers are that popular on the open market, as they are rather wrinkled and atrophied. If these Jews are so cunning and avaricious, I believe they would invest more wisely." He never appreciated my humor.

I was called into the case by the family of the victim, whose full name was Dr. Arthur Daniel Mergenthaler. Dr. Mergenthaler was known to be the wealthiest Jew in America at that time. I suppose I was chosen by the Mergenthaler family because my first case in New York received some notoriety in the press. I was able to explain the facts I uncovered about the man I shot at Green-Wood Cemetery, Joshua Reynolds, and a lot of the public believed me because they lived in the streets, and they heard about the murders committed in their midst every day.

Whereas the press only gave credence to murders they could turn into money--like the Mary Rogers murder--the people living in the streets saw the gang murders committed by men like Reynolds, and they knew such depraved minds existed and would continue to exist, as long as the powers at City Hall served the rich and not the poor. My dear Edgar Allan Poe knew this, although he could only express it in his dark stories, and I believe that's why the people still love his work and believe in me.

At any rate, in 1865, just after I killed Reynolds, the story about my case to clear the name of Edgar Allan Poe was given full coverage in *The Sun*, a publication noted for allowing all kinds of wild stories of speculation and sensation to be written in order to increase sales on the street corners of the city. In point of fact, this was the same publication that printed Poe's fictitious story in 1844 about the trans-Atlantic hot air balloon flight. The sale of this one story saved Poe and his young wife, Virginia, from starvation, and my story in this penny daily gained me the

attention of the family Mergenthaler, and I thus experienced my first face-to-face acquaintance with real Jews.

I was called on to meet these Jews by Dr. Abraham Jacobi, who worked at the New York Medical College as a professor of childhood diseases. He served as the friend and counsel to the Mergenthaler family, and Dr. Jacobi also knew the most about Dr. Arthur Mergenthaler, the kidnapped Jewish financier, as he was a childhood friend of the missing entrepreneur.

Dr. Jacobi wore a black city hat with a suit and vest and a matching bowed tie. He was in his early thirties, and his beard was full and black, and his grave consternation as he spoke to me allowed me to understand what effect the full tragedy of this event had on this man.

“Mister Patrick James O’Malley, I presume?” he asked, stepping inside my humble abode. I led him to be seated in my parlor, such as it was, with a window overlooking the traffic below on 42nd Street. We could smell the odors of the horses’ manure and the variety of peddlers’ victuals for sale on the sidewalks. My stomach was making turmoil, and I thought I would ask Dr. Jacobi out to luncheon at a nearby tavern, but he began his soliloquy before I could put forth my proposal.

“We’ve determined you to be the best choice because of the interview that was printed in *The Sun*. Are you aware of that article, Detective O’Malley?” Dr. Jacobi’s voice had a Germanic accent, and he sounded quite formal in his approach. My selection was a scientific affair, it seemed, and he was here to give me the reasons why I had been chosen.

“As the person who was interviewed, I was also given the right to go over the questions and answers before it was published,” I said, sitting down next to him on my small

blue divan. “The penny press is not usually so forthright in its practices, but this journalist, a Mister Dushane, was quite accurate in his reporting of my case and the details I gave him.”

“Ach! I knew it was true. You see we do not trust the local constabulary in this city, as they quite often collaborate with the very scoundrels we believe may be responsible for this kidnapping. However, we liked what we heard coming from you concerning the Edgar Allan Poe case and this is why we’ve decided to contract you. You have a logical mind, Mister O’Malley, and we also know that you once protected one of our own, a boy who would have now become a man. His name was Bernard Feinstein. He was at his Bar Mitzvah age, 13, when one of your associates, a Mister O’Hara, placed him bodily up at the top of an Elm tree in Central Park. As you saw, the boy was quite without his attire at the time.”

I was surprised at this bit of news. How were these Jews able to collect such facts about an event that happened so many years before? I did recall the incident, and it was a turning point in my own actions toward the Hebrews. “O’Hara put him up there because he wouldn’t say Jesus was God. I wanted to save him from the freezing cold. It was the middle of January, like today. He slipped and fell. His neck was broken when I examined him. His spectacles were shattered, and I took them back, along with his frail body, to his parents’ apartment in the Bronx.”

“Yes and our people remember such kindness. That’s the way we are taught to do things in this world. When I was imprisoned in Germany for taking part in a people’s revolution against the oppressive government, I never once thought I was in the wrong. Justice must prevail! You knew this to be the case when you climbed that tree. It is what we call a *mitzvah*, a good deed. We are judged by how often

we do these *mitzvot*. When a Gentile does this it is held in high regard. Will you help us find Dr. Mergenthaler?" Dr. Jacobi's eyes were moist with emotion, and he was wringing his hands, as if in despair and expectation of my response.

"Perhaps so. I need to know some facts about the incident first. Were you at the scene of the crime?"

"No, but we have a nurse and a doctor on duty that night who were. The police have already questioned them. These Irishers laughed at our pain. They told us they did not find enough evidence to gather suspects. I must admit, after conferring with the family, they decided to forget the police entirely and come to ask you as a private citizen. The way you were able to solve the Mary Rogers girl's murder along with proving that Mister Poe was killed was quite brilliant. We knew you were the right man for us."

"I don't work with the police either. Most of them are getting money from the scoundrels in the city's government, and the gangs throughout the city pay them protection money to stay away from their businesses. I work on my own for special clients, and I believe I may be able to help you," I said, standing up. "Take me over to see the family and these medical people. Do you think we can stop to get something to eat? I am famished!"

"Our new hospital has an excellent restaurant on its premises. Among other ideas, it was Dr. Mergenthaler's concept to provide a nutritious and well balanced diet to all our patients. I work with the city's poor children. This is one of the important factors in eradicating disease in our slums. Cleanliness and diet are probably the best indicators of health in a child. Yes, we will give you a fine meal at our new Mt. Sinai, Mister O'Malley. Come with me," he said, and we both walked to the door. I wore my old Army trench coat and cavalry boots. My white shirt and wool

topcoat kept me warm and dry in this winter weather.

* * *

“Enjoy! We have more where that came from,” said Missus Mergenthaler, a buxom lady with an infectious laugh. She stood over me as I shoveled down the last of my lean brisket of beef and potatoes. Even in the midst of tragedy, I noticed that these Jews kept their optimism and sense of humor. It must have been the way they had survived the numerous persecutions they had experienced around the world.

After I started attending the library regularly, shortly following the Shannon O’Hara incident in Central Park, I read about the Spanish Inquisitions and the European Pogroms against the Jews, and my opinion of them gradually changed. We Irish were also persecuted by the English and once again by their English ancestors here in the United States. We had our own diaspora, as did the Jews, and we probably needed to work together to solve the variety of social problems here in New York.

The rich always knew how to play one ethnic group against the other, and this was what my father understood. The poor of the Jews and the Irish were all in the same leaky boat, and when we could not find our oars we were cast about on the rough seas of American greed to fend for ourselves and fight each other for the limited number of jobs.

What had resulted was a city teeming with poor immigrants crowded into rat-infested hovels and tenements, fighting for every scrap of food and chance at upward mobility, yet given short shrift by the established wealthy classes who were in control. As I sat at their table inside the small dining room of the new Mt. Sinai Hospital, I felt warm inside, but I also realized that by working for them I was placing my own life in jeopardy. They must

have known this as well because they encircled me like protective hens, offering me more food, telling me stories about their children, explaining how they wanted to save all the children of the city because these youngsters had the right to an education and a clean living space.

The Mergenthaler family was a small one. There was Bessie, who was feeding me, and then there was Samuel, who stood in front of me, peering down at my plate and inspecting every forkful of food I thrust into my mouth as if he were personally responsible for my enjoyment or my indigestion. They looked like normal citizens of New York, and despite their wealth, they did not put on airs.

It was the youngest of the family who approached me to tug at my sleeve. He was Seth, aged five years, and he wore knee-pants and long stockings, and his curly hair was pasted down on his head with some kind of pomade. His curious brown eyes searched mine for a moment, and then he asked, "Do you eat cabbage?"

I smiled down at him. "I suppose I eat it sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"Eema says all the Irishers eat cabbage. And they get their children from the cabbage patch!" he laughed, and he made an elaborate face at me consisting of turning his nose upward with his little thumbs and raising his forefingers beside his ears to make him look like a rabbit.

Samuel took the young boy by his hand and led him away. "Come with me, Seth. I have a game for you to play. It's a game of Dominoes."

I watched them leave the room before I spoke up. I pushed away my plate, sat back in my chair and belched. "Excuse me, but that was quite delicious! I thank you all very much. However, I need to talk to the two people who saw the room where Mister Mergenthaler was when he was taken."

Dr. Jacobi came up to me. I could feel the tension in his voice. "You will see Dr. Jonathan Letterman. He was the physician on duty on December 15, the night we lost Arthur. I must advise you, however. Dr. Letterman is a veteran of the war, like yourself. He gets quite invigorated about this kidnapping, as he holds himself solely responsible for the dastardly act. This man is a genius in all other respects. He was Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac under General McClellan. Perhaps you have heard of his duties and his inventions?"

"My God, yes!" I said, quite invigorated myself. "After Dr. Letterman's sweeping changes occurred, our casualty rate on the battlefield was reduced in half! The man is indeed a genius. Before his battlefield ambulance corps and triage hospitals, we were losing more soldiers to infections and loss of blood than we were to enemy fire. I am honored to meet this man."

The new Letterman system had begun to be put in place at the Battle of Antietam in September of 1862, and first went into full use at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December. The result was a resounding success. The wounded were quickly and efficiently removed from the battlefield and treated, resulting in many more lives saved. General McClellan's order covered only the Army of the Potomac, but Letterman's system was adapted by other Union commands as time went on. Finally, an Act of U.S. Congress in March 1864 established a uniform system of ambulances for use in all United States armies, based on Letterman's system.

Samuel Mergenthaler entered the room, escorting Dr. Jonathan Letterman. Letterman was a bearded man of about five feet and four inches, with large ears and a stare of grim concentration. He surveyed the room as if he were expecting there to be a bomb hidden somewhere therein.

He picked up all the seat cushions, looked under tables, and lifted the lid on every container in the pantry and peered inside.

Seemingly assured that it was now safe, he walked over to me and, seeing that he was waiting for me, I saluted him, and he returned the gesture as an officer and gentleman. He still wore his black Union Army doctor's uniform with the scarlet sash and brass buttons, as I supposed he wanted us all to understand his allegiance to the government in Washington D.C. and not to this ruffian city of New York which had to put down the rabble in the Draft Riots of 1863.

“Sergeant Patrick O'Malley! It's an honor, sir. I've heard of your award for protecting General Sherman. That's what I should have done for Dr. Mergenthaler. The kidnapers were able to get in and out of my hospital without so much as a whisper of suspicion from me or my staff on duty! Can you believe it? I spent hundreds of hours on the battlefield perfecting my medical system and getting conscientious workers employed in the transport of the wounded, and yet I could not prevent the kidnapping of one of my own people! What does that say about me? I'll tell you. It says I am a mental defective. I was too long in the West chasing down savages! It addled my brain, man!” he said, and he pointed to his head.

“I believe you to be a better man than you give yourself credit for, sir. Let me question you about that night. Perhaps I can ascertain what happened.” I motioned for him to sit, and he did so. I paced in front of him as I asked my questions, looking around me at the assembled Mergenthaler family from time to time to gain their input if need be.

“Yes, I am ready. I am retiring to California after this. I want to be alone with my troubles. Private practice will do

me good.”

“Dr. Letterman, what did you see during the hours before Dr. Mergenthaler disappeared? Were there reports of any strangers on the property or inside the building? I want to know if anybody was reported, no matter how innocuous or strange,” I said, gesturing in an inclusive, circular motion with my right hand.

“I tell you there were no strangers or different people inside this hospital. I have watches set on every floor, and they can report to me from pneumatic tubes I have installed so we can communicate in an instant if somebody untoward should enter.”

“Please. Think back. Anybody at all? Any noises? Anything out of the ordinary?” I picked up my walking pace, back and forth, until his brown eyes were following me as if I were a tiger in a cage.

“No!” he shouted, and then he stopped. I saw his Adam’s apple move up and down above his starched white collar. “Wait one moment. Yes! I heard a knocking on the walls. I thought it was probably the workers doing late repairs to our building. We had not yet completed all the outside work, such as window sashes and rain gutters. I sent Nurse Levine out to see what it was. She told me there was nothing.”

“May I speak with this nurse?” I asked.

Samuel left the room to get her.

“Take me to the room where he was located. By the way, what was Dr. Mergenthaler in the hospital for?” I asked, watching Dr. Letterman rise and walk out into the white corridors. I followed him closely as we walked up the stairs to the fourth floor.

“He suffers from what we diagnosed as Ulcerative Colitis. Abrasions inside the colon led to his frequent stomach pains and diarrheal episodes. There were two

members in his late family who had this disorder when all we knew was that it was caused by bacteria or infectious agents.”

We walked inside the biggest hospital room in the building and shut the door. I pointed to the bed. “Is this where he was lying?”

Nurse Levine was standing beside the bed waiting for us. She was a tall and thin young woman with dark eyes and eyebrows that met in the middle of her forehead. Her white uniform glowed in the gaslights. “Yes, I was charge nurse on duty, and Dr. Mergenthaler was in this bed,” she said.

“How soon before the disappearance did you investigate the noises?”

“About ten minutes. I looked outside the building and walked around, but I got back to his room in about ten minutes. I know because I had to give him his medicine, and I was looking at the clock on the table beside his bed before I left to investigate. When I returned, he had disappeared without a trace. No clothes were taken. He alone was gone. Only his little boy, Seth, was in the room. He told me something about being invisible.”

I looked over the room. It had one window on the 28th Street side, overlooking the street below. It was four stories up, so a cat burglar would probably never be able to abscond with the doctor. No, there must have been some other way. Perhaps Mergenthaler left alone. Perhaps one of the staff escorted him some way that did not raise suspicion. I wanted to know about the knocking.

I began on the walls of the hospital room, knocking on the boards with my fist, taking time to cover the entire surface of the four walls. I listened for a hollow sound. I thought about my beloved Edgar and his love of walls. Dead bodies were hidden inside Poe’s walls, so perhaps here as well. Was Dr. Mergenthaler’s corpse rotting inside

one of the building's carved-out partition structures? Slowly and methodically, I knocked on all the walls, all throughout the new Mt. Sinai Hospital. The entire family Mergenthaler and most of the hospital staff were following me and watching my every knock. Just when I was about to give up, I heard it. The telltale heart revealed the hollow beating of an empty partition enclosure. "Rip out this wall!" I said, and my heart began to beat faster in momentous expectation of what we might discover inside.

DISAPPEARANCE AT MOUNT SINAI

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