“The Duke” of Asheville

By Chris Morton *

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He was a man of mystery, this fellow who arrived in Asheville in the fall of 1902. An Englishman with a persistent cough, he was obviously in poor health. He was attended by a nurse who knew very little about him. Despite his thin, frail posture, he presented a dashing spectacle as he stepped from the train in a well-pressed suit, bowler hat, and Vandyke-style beard. He took a room at one of Asheville’s more-exclusive boardinghouses on Montford Avenue, registering under the name of Mr. Charles J. Asquith. In the resort town of nearly fifteen thousand people, rumors began to spread that this stranger was connected to the English nobility—a man of great wealth.

Asquith lived but three weeks before dying suddenly. Doctors suspected tuberculosis. After he died, it was discovered that—far from being wealthy—Asquith had only five dollars to his name, not even enough to pay his nurse. His body was given over to the care of a local mortician, Claude Holder, at Noland-Brown Funeral Home on Church Street. Telegrams were sent to England in search of Asquith’s family. But no one seemed to know of a Charles Asquith traveling in the Americas—certainly no one connected to the nobility. So the mayor of Asheville ordered that the body be embalmed and held until someone came forward to claim it and pay the dead man’s bills.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. Eventually, more than seven years would pass as the mummified corpse waited in the mortuary. The townspeople now jokingly called the man “The Duke.” Occasionally, he would be loaded into a surrey and paraded around town, to the delight or horror of the assembled masses that were often caught off guard. Jaws dropped, and children giggled, as the surrey carrying the lifeless “Duke” clip-clopped ceremoniously around Pack Square and returned to Noland-Brown. When not being chauffeured up and down the streets, The Duke lay quietly in a box in one corner of an upstairs room of the mortuary. He also became an inactive participant in several gruesome practical jokes.

Once, for example, when an unsuspecting man came to the funeral home to apply for a job, he was sent to see “the boss.” “He doesn’t talk much,” said one of the attendants. “Just go upstairs and tell him what you want.” After a period of silence, the snickering funeral home workers heard a loud yell upstairs, followed by heavy footsteps and a head-over-heels tumble down the stairs and out the front door. Sometimes the mortician would display The Duke in the glass front window, as evidence of the superior quality of the embalming done at Noland-Brown.

Finally, one spring day in 1910, a lady presenting herself as Mrs. T. J. Summerfield arrived at Noland-Brown Funeral Home. She was equally shrouded in mystery, claiming

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to be the sister-in-law of The Duke. She explained that she had come to claim the remains on behalf of her sister—his wife—who lived in Baltimore. She said that his real name was not Asquith but Sidney Lascelles. He went by other names as well, including "Lord Beresford," she said. He had been a sort of con man who roamed the world, gambling and losing money in phony business scams and horse racing ventures. It was even rumored that he had been married to several women at the same time, she added. His family had been unaware of his whereabouts for several years. Mrs. Summerfield planned to take the body to Washington, D.C., for cremation and burial.

So, after signing an affidavit affirming her story, posting a two-thousand-dollar bond (no small sum in 1910), and paying one hundred and fifty dollars for the embalming expenses, Mrs. Summerfield had The Duke loaded onto a train headed north. Several townspeople gathered on the station platform and waved a solemn farewell. Many were sad to see The Duke go. It was as if they were saying a final good-bye to an old friend.

But as time passed, new questions began to emerge. Dr. McPherson Crichton—a doctor in Washington that Mrs. Summerfield had said would cremate the mummified corpse—later stated that he had no knowledge of such an arrangement, nor did he know of a Mrs. Summerfield. In fact, it appeared that the mysterious Mrs. Summerfield had never arrived in Baltimore with the remains. There was no cremation, and presumably no burial, in Washington. So what had happened to The Duke?

The mystery surrounding Asheville's mystery man seemed only to deepen.
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Like "The Duke," many people came to Asheville in the early 1900s to enjoy the perceived health benefits of the mountainous climate. Some came seeking a relief of symptoms from, or a cure for, such ailments as tuberculosis (TB), rheumatism, or "nervous disorders." Sanitariums—hospitals that housed the sick—began to open in Asheville to care for the increasing numbers of patients. In 1871 a German physician who was studying the effects of climate on health opened the nation's first TB sanitarium (The Villa) in Asheville. By the early 1900s, Asheville had become firmly established as the outstanding tuberculosis center east of the Rocky Mountains. Asheville still hosts a number of people seeking alternative approaches to health and healing or seeking to experience the rejuvenating effect of the mountains upon the mind, body, and spirit.

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Glossary:

Affidavit: A sworn statement made in writing under oath.
Boardinghouse: Lodgings at which meals are provided.
Cremate: To reduce to ashes by burning.
Embalming: The process of treating a dead body to protect it from decay.
Mortuary: A place in which dead bodies are kept until being buried.
Surrey: A four-wheeled, two-seated, horse-drawn pleasure carriage.
Tuberculosis: A highly contagious disease of man and some other vertebrates caused by the tubercle bacillus and characterized by toxic symptoms or allergic manifestations, which in man primarily affect the lungs.
Vandyke: A trim, pointed beard.

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