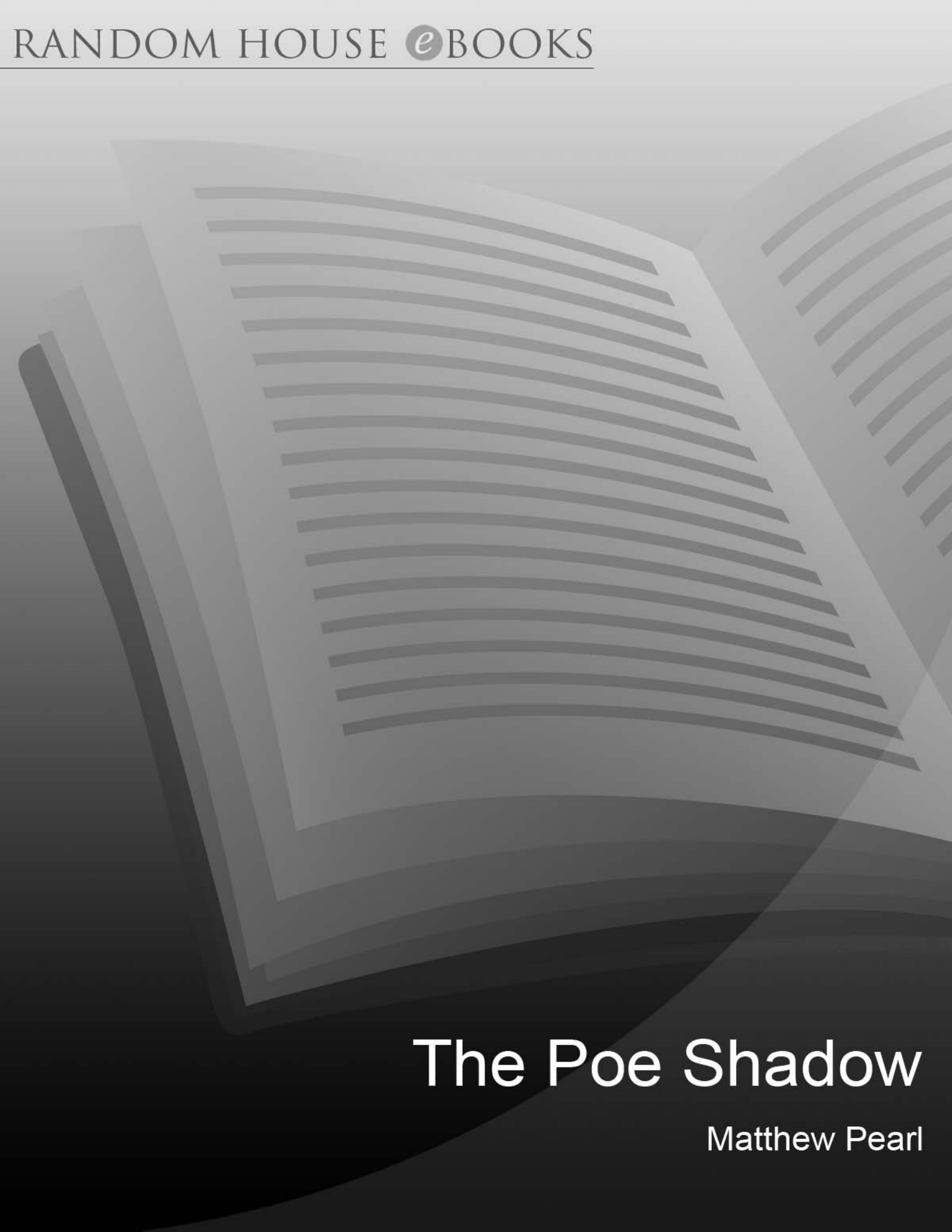


RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



The Poe Shadow

Matthew Pearl

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Matthew Pearl

Dedication

Title Page

Publisher's Note

Prologue

BOOK I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

BOOK II

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

BOOK III

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

BOOK IV

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

BOOK V

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Historical Note

Acknowledgments

Copyright

About the Book

Baltimore, 1849. The body of Edgar Allan Poe has been buried in an unmarked grave. The conclusion that Poe was a second-rate writer who died a drunkard is accepted by all. But none of this deters Quentin Clark, an ardent admirer who risks his own career and reputation in a passionate crusade to salvage Poe's.

Clark discovers that Poe's last days are riddled with vital unanswered questions. But just when Poe's death looks destined to remain a mystery, Quentin seeks out the one person who can solve this strange case: the real-life model for Poe's brilliant fictional detective character, C. Auguste Dupin. Having successfully recruited the man he believes to have inspired Poe's Dupin, Clark is confronted by another claiming to be the true model. The two master detectives each seek to prove he is the real 'Dupin' by solving the mystery of Poe's death. Clark finds himself enmeshed in sinister machinations and, with his own future hanging in the balance, he must turn master investigator himself to unchain his now imperilled fate from that of Poe.

About the Author

Matthew Pearl is the internationally bestselling author of *The Dante Club*, which has been published in more than thirty languages and forty countries. Pearl is a graduate of Harvard University and Yale Law School and has taught literature at Harvard and at Emerson College. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

ALSO BY MATTHEW PEARL

The Dante Club

For my parents

Matthew Pearl

The Poe Shadow

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: *The mystery related to the strange death of Edgar Allan Poe in 1849 has been uncovered through the following pages.*



I PRESENT TO YOU, *Your Honor and Gentlemen of the Jury, the truth about this man's death and my life. The narrative has not been told before. Whatever has been taken away from me, one last possession remains: this story. There are those of our city today who tried to stop it. There are those sitting here among you who still believe me a criminal, a liar, an outcast, a clever, vile murderer. Me, Your Honor: Quentin Hobson Clark, citizen of Baltimore, member of the bar, a fond reader.*

But this story is not about me. Please think of this, if you think of nothing else! It never was about me; ambition had never been my chosen stimulus. This was not motivated by my own fortunes among my fellow class or reputation in the eyes of higher judges. It was about something greater than I am, greater than all this, about a man by whom time will remember us though you had forgotten him before the earth settled. Somebody had to do it. We could not just keep still. I could not keep still.

All that follows will be the plain truth. And I must tell you it because I am the one nearest the truth. Or, rather, the only one still living.

It is one of life's peculiar facts that it is usually those no longer alive whose stories preserve the truth. . . .

These statements above I scribbled in the pages of my memorandum book (the last sentence is crossed out, I notice, with "philosophical!" written in my hand beside it as critique). Before walking into that courthouse, I scribbled these words in desperate preparation to face my defamers, those who thought ruining me rescued themselves. Because

I am an attorney, you may think the prospect of all this—I mean standing before a courtroom of onlookers and former friends, and two women who might love me—you might think the prospect of doing that would be fairly effortless to the experienced Baltimore attorney. Not so. To be an attorney, you must be interested above all else in the interests of others. It does not prepare a man to decide what must be saved. It does not prepare a man to save himself.

—BOOK I—

OCTOBER 8, 1849

I REMEMBER THE day it began because I was impatient for an important letter to arrive. Also, because it was meant to be the day of my engagement to Hattie Blum. And, of course, it was the day I saw him dead.

The Blums were near neighbors of my family. Hattie was the youngest and most affable of four sisters who were considered nearly the prettiest four sisters in Baltimore. Hattie and I had been acquainted from our very infancies, as we were told often enough through the years. And each time we were told how long we'd known each other, I think the words were meant also to say, "and you shall know each other evermore, depend upon it."

And in spite of such pressure as might easily have pushed us apart, even at eleven years old I became like a little husband toward my playfellow. I never made outward professions of love to Hattie, but I devoted myself to her happiness in small ways while she entertained me with her talk. There was something hushed about her voice, which often sounded to me like a lullaby.

My own nature while in society as it developed was markedly quiet and tranquil, to the degree that I was often asked at any given moment if I had only just then been stirred awake. In quieter company, though, I had the habit of turning unaccountably loquacious and even rambling in my speech. Therefore, I savored the stretches of Hattie's animated conversation. I believe I depended upon them. I felt no need to call attention to myself when I was with her; I felt happy and modest and, above all, easy.

Now, I should note that I did not *know* that I was expected to propose marriage on the afternoon with which we begin this narration. I was on my way to the post office from the nearby chambers of our law practice when I crossed paths with a woman of good Baltimore society, Mrs. Blum- Hattie's aunt. She pointed out immediately that the errands of retrieving waiting mail should be assigned to one of my lesser and less occupied legal clerks.

"You are a specimen, aren't you, Quentin Clark!" Mrs. Blum said. "You wander the streets when you are working, and when you're not working, you have a look upon your face as though you were!"

She was your genuine Baltimorean; she suffered no man without proper commercial interests any more than she would tolerate a girl who was not beautiful.

This was Baltimore, and whether in fine weather or in this day's fog it was a very red-brick type of place, where the movements of the people on well-paved streets and marble steps were quick and boisterous but without gaiety. There was not much of that last quality in supply in our go-ahead city, where large houses stood elevated over a crowded trading bay. Coffee and sugar came in from South America and the West India Islands on great clipper ships, and the barrels of oysters and family flour moved out on the multiplying railway tracks toward Philadelphia and Washington. Nobody *looked* poor then in Baltimore, even those who were, and every other awning seemed to be a daguerreotype establishment ready to record that fact for posterity.

Mrs. Blum on this occasion smiled and took my arm as we walked through the thoroughfare. "Well, everything is quite perfectly arranged for this evening."

"This evening," I replied, trying to guess what she could be referring to. Peter Stuart, my law partner, had mentioned a supper party at the home of a mutual acquaintance. I had been thinking so much of the letter I anticipated retrieving, I

had until then forgotten completely. "This evening, of course, Mrs. Blum! How I've looked forward to it."

"Do you know," she continued, "do you know, Mr. Clark, that only yesterday I heard dear Miss Hattie spoken of on Market Street"- this generation of Baltimoreans still called Baltimore Street by its former name- "yes, talked about as the loveliest unmarried beauty in all Baltimore!"

"One could argue the loveliest above all, married or not," I said.

"Well, isn't that clever!" she replied. "Oh, it won't do at all, twenty-seven and still living bachelor and- now don't interrupt, dear Quentin! A proper young man doesn't . . ."

I had trouble hearing what she said next because a loud rumble of two carriages grew behind us. "If it is a hackney approaching," I thought to myself, "I shall put her into it, and offer double the fare." But as they passed I could see both were private carriages, and the one in front was a sleek, shiny hearse. Its horses kept their heads low, as if in deference to the honorable cargo.

No one else turned to look.

Leaving behind my walking companion with a parting promise of seeing her at the evening's gathering, I found myself crossing the next avenue. A herd of swine swarmed past with belligerent shrieks, and my detour ran along Greene Street and across to Fayette, where hearse and mourning-carriage were parked together.

In a quiet burial ground there, a ceremony began and ended abruptly. I strained through the fog at the figures in attendance. It was like standing in a dream- everything blurred into silhouettes, and I swallowed down the vague feeling that I should not be there. The minister's oration sounded muffled from where I stood at the gates. The small gathering, I suppose, did not demand much effort from his voice.

It was the saddest funeral ever seen.

It was the weather. No: the mere four or five men in attendance- the minimum needed to lift an adult coffin. Or perhaps the melancholy quality came chiefly from that brisk, callous completion of the ceremony. Not even the most impoverished pauper's funeral that I had observed before this day, nor the funerals of the poor Jewish cemetery nearby, not even those exhibited such *unchristian* indifference. There wasn't one flower, wasn't one tear.

Afterward, I retraced my steps only to find the post office had bolted its doors. I could not know whether there was a letter waiting for me inside or not- but I returned to our office chambers and reassured myself. *Soon, I'd hear more from him soon.*

That evening at the social gathering, I found myself on a private stroll with Hattie Blum along a field of berries, dormant for the season but shadowed with summer remembrances of Champagne and Strawberry Parties. As ever, I could speak comfortably to Hattie.

"Our practice is awfully interesting at times," I said. "Yet I think I should like to choose the cases with more discrimination. A lawyer in ancient Rome, you know, swore never to defend a cause unless he thought it was just. We take cases if their pay is just."

"You can change your office, Quentin. It is your name and your character hanging on the shingle too, after all. Make it more like yourself, rather than make yourself more suited to it."

"Do you believe so, Miss Hattie?"

Twilight was settling and Hattie became uncharacteristically quiet, which I fear meant that I became insufferably talkative. I examined her expression but found no clues to the source of her distant bearing.

"You laughed for me," Hattie said absently, almost as though I would not hear her.

"Miss Hattie?"

She looked up at me. "I was only thinking of when we were children. Do you know at first I thought you were a fool?"

"Appreciated," I chuckled.

"My father would take my mother away during her different sicknesses, and you would come to play when my aunt was minding me. You were the only one to know just how to make me smile until my parents returned, because you were always laughing at the strangest things!" She said this wistfully, while lifting the bottom of her long skirts to avoid the muddy ground.

Later, when we were inside warming ourselves, Hattie talked quietly with her aunt, whose entire countenance had stiffened from earlier in the day. Auntie Blum asked what should be arranged for Hattie's birthday.

"It is coming, I suppose," Hattie said. "I should hardly think of it, typically, Auntie. But this year . . ." She trailed off into a cheerless hum. At supper, she hardly touched the food.

I did not like this at all. I felt myself turn into an eleven-year-old boy again, an anxious protector of the girl across the way. Hattie had been such a reliable presence in my life that any discomfort on her part upset me. Thus it was perhaps from a selfish motivation I tried to cure her mood, but at all events I did wish her to be genuinely happy.

Others of the party, like my law partner, Peter, joined in attempting to raise her spirits, and I studied each of them vigilantly in the event that one of them had been responsible for bringing Hattie Blum into a fit of blues.

Something was hindering my own role in cheering her on this day: that funeral I had seen. I cannot properly explain why, but it had thoroughly exploded my peace. I tried to call to mind a picture of it again. There had been only the four men in attendance to listen to the minister. One, taller than the others, stood toward the rear, his gaze floating off, as though the most anxious of all to be somewhere else. Then,

as they came toward the road, there were their grim mouths. The faces were not known to me but also not forgotten. Only one member delayed, staying his steps regretfully, as though overhearing my private thoughts. The event seemed to speak of a terrible loss and yet to do it no honor. It was, in a word, Wrong.

Under this vague cloud of distraction, my efforts exhausted themselves without rescuing Hattie's spirits. I could only bow and express my helpless regrets in unison with the other guests when Hattie and her Auntie Blum were among the first to depart from the supper party. I was pleased when Peter suggested we bring an end to the evening, too.

"Well, Quentin? What has come over you?" Peter asked in an eruption. We were sharing a hired carriage back to our houses.

I thought to tell him of the sad funeral, but Peter would not understand why that had been occupying my mind. Then I realized by the gravity of his posture that he referred to something altogether different. "Peter," I asked, "what do you mean?"

"Did you decide *not* to propose to Hattie Blum this evening, after all?" he demanded with a loud exhalation.

"Propose! I?"

"She'll be twenty-three in a few weeks. For a Baltimore girl today, that is practically an old maid! Do you not love the dear girl even a little?"

"Who could not love Hattie Blum? But stay, Peter! How is it you came to assume we were to be engaged on this night? Had I ever suggested this was my design?"

"How is it I-? Do you not know as well as I do that the date today is the very same date *your own parents* were engaged? Had this failed to occur to you even once this evening?"

It had indeed failed to occur to me, as a matter of fact, and even being reminded of this coincidence provided little

comprehension of Peter's queer assumption. He explained further that Auntie Blum had been sagely certain I would take the opportunity of this party to propose, and had thought I had even hinted such earlier in the day, and had so informed Peter and Hattie of this likelihood so they would not be surprised. / had been the unwitting, principal cause of Hattie's mysterious distress. I had been the wretch!

"When would have been a more reasonable time than tonight?" Peter continued. "An anniversary so important to you! When? It was as plain as the sun at noon-day."

"I hadn't realized . . ." I stammered.

"How couldn't you see she was waiting for you, that it is time for your future to begin? Well, here, you're home. I wish you a restful sleep. Poor Hattie is probably weeping into her pillow even now!"

"I should never wish to make her sad," I said. "I wish only that I knew what seemed to be expected from me by everyone else." Peter gruffly muttered agreement, as though I had finally struck upon my general failing.

Of course I would propose, and of course we would marry! Hattie's presence in my life had been my good fortune. I brightened whenever I saw her and, even more, whenever we were apart and I thought about her. There had been so little change all this time knowing her, I suppose it had just seemed odd to call for it now with a proposal.

"What *do* you think about?" Peter seemed to say with his brow as I closed the carriage door to bid him good night. I pulled the door back open.

"There was a funeral earlier," I said, deciding to try to redeem myself with some explanation. "You see, I watched it pass, and I suppose it troubled me for a reason I had not . . ." But no, I still could not find the words to justify its effects on me.

"A funeral! A stranger's funeral!" Peter cried. "Now, what in heaven does that have to do with you?"

Everything, but I did not know that then. The next morning I came down in my dressing gown and opened the newspaper to distract myself. Had I been warned, I still could not have predicted my own alarm at what I saw that made me forget my other concerns. It was a small heading on one of the inside pages that caught me. *Death of Edgar A. Poe.*

I would toss the newspaper aside, then would pick it up again, turning pages to read something else; then I'd read again and again that heading: *Death of Edgar A. Poe. . . . the distinguished American poet, scholar, and critic in the thirty-eighth year of his age.*

No! Thirty-nine, I believed, but possessed of a wisdom worth a hundred times that . . . *Born in this city.* No again! (How questionable it all was, even before I knew more.)

Then I noticed . . . those four words.

Died in this city.

This city? This was not telegraphed news. This had occurred here in Baltimore. The death in our own city, the burial, maybe, too. Could it be that the very funeral on Greene and Fayette . . . No! That little funeral, that unceremonious ceremony, that *entombment* in the narrow burial yard?

At the office that day, Peter sermonized about Hattie, but I could hardly discuss it, intrigued instead by these tidings. I sent for confirmation from the sexton, the caretaker of the burial yard. Poor Poe, he replied. Yes, Poe was gone. As I rushed to the post office to see if any letter had arrived, my thoughts revolved around what I had unknowingly witnessed.

That cold-blooded formality. That had been Baltimore's farewell to our nation's literary savior, my favorite author, my (perhaps) friend? I could barely contain the sense of anger growing within me; anger of a sort that blocked out everything else. I know, looking back on this, that I never wanted to hurt Hattie through the commotion that crept over my mind beginning that afternoon. Yes, this was my

favorite author, who had died in my midst, but even then it was far more than that. Perhaps I cannot in one breath fairly describe why it was so devastating to a man with youth, with romantic and professional prospects enviable to anyone in Baltimore.

Perhaps it was this fact. I- without having appreciated the fact- / had been the one to see him last; or, rather, as all others rushed past, I had been the last to watch the indifferent earth rattling over his coffin, as over the nameless corpses of the world.

I had a dead man for a client and the Day of Judgment as my hearing date.

That was the sardonic way Peter put it a few weeks later when I began my fateful inquiries. My law partner did not have enough of the wit about him to be sardonic more than three or four times in his life, so you can imagine the agitation behind the words. Peter, a man of height and bulk, was my elder by only a few years, but he sighed with the sigh of an old man, especially at the mention of Edgar A. Poe.

By my teen years, two facts in my life were as fixed as destiny: my admiration for literary works by Edgar Poe and, as you have heard, my attachment to Hattie Blum.

Even as a boy, Peter talked about Hattie and me being married with the focus of a man of business. In his prudent heart, the boy was older than all other boys. When his father had died, my parents, through my father's church, had assisted the widowed Mrs. Stuart, who had been left nearly destitute by debt, and my father treated Peter like another son. Peter was so thankful for this that he dutifully and genuinely adopted all of my father's positions on affairs of the world, far more than I could ever seem to do. Indeed, it might have seemed to a stranger that he was the rightful Clark, and I a second-rate pretender to the name.

Peter even shared my father's distaste toward my literary preferences. *This* Edgar Poe, he and my father were both prone to say, this Poe that you read with such compulsion is *peculiar* beyond taste. Reading for the relief of *ennui* was simply pleasuremongering, no more useful to the world than dozing in the middle of an afternoon. Literature should improve the heart; these fantasies cripple it!

That is how most people saw Poe, and I would not have disagreed at first. I was hardly out of boyhood the first time I came upon Poe's work, a *Gentleman's Magazine* tale called "William Wilson." I confess I could not make much of it. I could find neither beginning nor end and could not distinguish the portions that exhibited reason from those of madness. It was like holding a page up to a mirror and trying to read it. Genius was not looked for in the magazines, and I saw no greater amount of it residing in Mr. Poe.

But I was only a boy. My judgment was transformed by a story of a class peculiar to Poe, a story of criminal detection entitled "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." This story's hero is C. Auguste Dupin, a young Frenchman who ingeniously unravels the truth behind the shocking slayings of two women. One woman's body is found in a house in Paris, thrust up the chimney feetfirst. Her mother, meanwhile, has been sliced at the neck so severely that when the police try to raise her body, her head falls off. There were valuables in plain view in their chambers, yet whatever deranged intruder had been inside had left them unmolested. The singularity of the crime was entirely baffling to the Paris police and the press and the witnesses- well, to everyone. Everyone except C. Auguste Dupin.

Dupin understood.

He understood that it was the strikingly singular nature of the deaths that made them at once *easily solvable*, for it separated the event instantly from the indistinguishable muddle of everyday crimes. It seemed to the police and the

press that the murders could not have been done by even an irrational person, because they had been done by no person. Dupin's reasoning followed a method Poe called *ratiocination*—employing one's imagination to achieve analysis, and one's analysis to climb the heights of imagination. Through this method, Dupin showed how a rare orangutan, provoked to a rage by abuse, had committed the horrible atrocities.

From the hand of an ordinary person, the particulars would have seemed stuff and nonsense. But at the very moment the reader expresses disbelief at the course of events, every difficulty is eliminated by an unbreakable chain of reasoning. Poe whetted the curiosity for what is possible to its sharpest edge, and that brought the soul along with it. These tales of ratiocination (with sequels touching Dupin's further cases) became Poe's most popular among a mass of readers, but, in my opinion, for the wrong reasons. Mere spectator readers enjoyed seeing an unbroken puzzle solved, but there was a higher level of importance. *My ultimate object is only the truth*, said Dupin to his assistant. I understood, through Dupin, that truth was Edgar A. Poe's only object, too, and that precisely is what frightened and confused so many about Poe. The genuine mystery was not the particular riddle that the mind aches to know; *the mind of man*, this was the tale's true and lasting mystery.

And I found something new to me as a reader: recognition. I felt suddenly less alone in the world with his words before me. Perhaps this is why the occasion of Poe's death, which might have riveted another reader for a passing day or two, inhabited my thoughts.

My father liked to say that truth resided in honest professional gentlemen of the world, not in the monstrous tales and hoaxing stories of some magazine writer. He had no use for Genius. He said that most men in the armies of the world were required to attend to homely duties of life,

where Industry and Enterprise were more in need than Genius, which was too squeamish at men's dullness to succeed in the world. His business was packinghouses, but he took to the notion that a young man should be an attorney, a complete business in itself, he said admiringly. Peter positively thrilled at the plan as though he were boarding the first ship to California on whispers of gold.

Upon achieving maturity, Peter situated himself as an apprentice to a law office of some distinction and while there achieved notice for compiling a thorough work, *An Index to the Laws of Maryland, from the Year 1834 to 1843*. My father soon financed Peter's own practice, and it was clear that I was to study and work under my friend. It was a plan too reasonable to object to, and I never once thought to do so- not once that I can remember, at least.

You are fortunate, Peter wrote to me when I was still at my university. *You shall have a fine office here with me under your Father's auspices and you shall marry as soon as you wish. Every beautiful young woman of high standing on Baltimore Street smiles on you, by the bye. If I were you, if I had a face half as handsome as yours, Quentin Clark, how well I would know what to do with ease and luxury in society!*

By the fall of 1849, where you joined me some pages earlier, I had my profession in place so securely I hardly took notice of it. Peter Stuart and I made excellent partners. My parents were both gone by then, killed by a carriage accident while they were traveling in Brazil for my father's business. There was an empty spot where there once had been guidance from my father. And yet, the life he'd arranged for me flowed on in his absence- all this, Hattie, Peter, the well-pressed clients appearing daily in our offices, my stately family house shaded by ancient poplars and known as Glen Eliza, after my mother. All this ran on as

though operated by some noiseless and ingenious automatic machine. Until Poe's death.

I had the young man's weakness of wishing others to understand everything that concerned me- of needing to *make* others understand. I believed I could. I can call to mind the very first time I told Peter we should work to protect Edgar A. Poe. Believing that, as a result of the compliance I imagined on the part of Peter, I would be able to report back the good tidings to Mr. Poe.

My very first letter to Edgar Poe, on March 16, 1845, was brought about by a question I had when reading "The Raven," then a recently published poem. The final verses leave the raven sitting atop a bust of Pallas "above my chamber door." With these last lines of the poem, the impish and mysterious bird continues to haunt the young man of the poem, perhaps for eternity:

*And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is
dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on
the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the
floor*

Shall be lifted- nevermore!

If the raven sits at the top of the chamber door, though, what lamplight would be behind him in such a way as to cast his shadow to the floor? With the impetuousness of youth, I wrote to Poe himself for an answer, for I wanted to be able to envision every crevice and corner of the poem. Along with the question, I enclosed in the same letter to Mr. Poe a subscription fee for a new magazine called *The Broadway Journal*, which Poe was then editing, to make sure I'd see whatever else flowed from his pen.

After months without receiving any reply, and without a single number of *The Broadway Journal*, I wrote again to Mr.

Poe. When the silence persisted, I addressed a complaint to an associate of the magazine in New York and insisted that my subscription be refunded in full. I no longer desired to ever see it. One day, I received my three dollars back, along with a letter.

Signed Edgar A. Poe.

How startling, how uplifting that was, such a lofty visionary bringing himself to personally address a mere reader of three and twenty years! He even explained the minor mystery regarding the raven's shadow: "My conception was that of the bracket candelabrum affixed against the wall, high up above the door and bust- as is often seen in the English palaces, and even in some of the better houses in New-York."

There was the very nature of the raven's shadow explained just for me! Poe also thanked me for my literary opinions and encouraged me to send more. He explained that his financial partners in *The Broadway Journal* had forced its termination in yet another defeat in the struggle between money and literature. He had never regarded the journal as more than a temporary adjunct to other designs. One day, he said, we might meet in person and he would confide in me his plans, and inquire my advice. "I am entirely ignorant," he stated, "of all law matters."

I wrote nine letters to Poe between 1845 and his death in October 1849. I received in return four courteous and sincere notes in his own hand.

His most energetic comments were about his ambitions for his proposed journal, *The Stylus*. Poe had spent years editing other people's magazines. Poe said the journal would finally allow *men of genius* to triumph over *men of talent*, men who could feel rather than men who could think. It would cheer no author who did not deserve it, and would publish all literature that was unified by clarity and, most importantly, truth. He had waited many years to begin this journal. He wrote to me the last summer before his death

that if waiting until the *Day of Judgment* would increase his chances of success, so he would! But, he added, he instead hoped to have the first number of it out the next January.

Poe anticipated with excitement a trip to Richmond to gather finances and support, commenting that if everything went as he intended, his final success was certain. He needed to raise funds and subscriptions. But he continued to be hindered by the rumors in the so-called professional press of irregular and immoral habits, questions about his sanity, unfit romantic dalliances, general excessiveness. Enemies, he said, were always at his throat for publishing honest criticisms of their writings, and for having had the great nerve to point out the complete lack of originality in revered authors like Longfellow and Lowell. He feared that the animosities of small men would attack his efforts by painting him as a sot, an unworthy drunk not deserving any public influence.

That is when I asked. I asked plainly, maybe too plainly. Were these at all true, these accusations I had heard for years? Was he, Edgar A. Poe, a drunkard who had given himself over to excess?

He wrote back without the least air of offense or conscious superiority. He vowed to me- me, a practical and presumptuous stranger- that he was wholly abstemious. Some readers might question my ability to judge his truthfulness from afar, but my instincts spoke with unclouded certainty. In my next letter, I replied that I put full confidence in his word. Then, just before sealing my reply, I decided to do better.

I made a proposal. I would bring suit against any false accuser attempting to damage his efforts to launch *The Stylus*. We had represented the interests of some local periodicals before, providing me with the proper experience. I would do my part to ensure that genius would not be trampled. This would be my duty, just as it was his duty to astonish the world now and then.

“Thank you for your promise about *The Stylus*,” answered Poe in a letter replying to mine. “Can you or will you help me? I have room to say no more. I depend upon you implicitly.”

That was shortly before Poe began his lecture tour in Richmond. Emboldened by his response to my offer, I wrote again, pouring out a myriad of questions about his *Stylus* and where he planned to raise money. I expected he would respond while he was touring, which is why I visited the post office and, when business consumed my time, checked the lists of waiting mail the postmaster regularly inserted in the newspapers.

I had been reading Poe’s work more than ever. Particularly after my parents died. Some considered it distasteful that I would read literature that frequently touched on the topic of death. Yet in Poe, while death is not a pleasant subject, it is not forbidden. Nor is it a fixed end. Death is an experience that can be shaped by the living. Theology tells us that spirits live on beyond the body, but Poe believes it.

Peter, of course, had at the time vocally dismissed the idea of our law practice taking up the cause of *The Stylus*.

“I would sooner cut off my hand than spend my time worrying about magazines of blasted fiction! I would sooner get run down by an omnibus than—” You can see what he was driving at.

You’d probably guess that the real reason Peter objected was because I could not answer his questions about the *fees*. Poe was regularly reported in the papers as penniless. Why take upon ourselves, Peter argued, what others wouldn’t? I pointed out that the source for our payments was obvious: the new journal. Success was guaranteed for it!

What I wanted to say to Peter was “Do you not ever feel you are becoming hackneyed by the lawyer’s routine? Forget the fees. Wouldn’t you wish to protect something you

knew to be great that everyone else sought to desecrate? Wouldn't you wish to be a part of changing something, even if it meant changing yourself?" That line of argument would have accomplished nothing with Peter. When Poe died Peter was quietly satisfied that the matter had ended.

But I was not, not in the least. As I read newspaper articles eulogizing Poe with bitter voices, my desire to protect his name only grew. Something had to be done *even more* than before. When he was alive, he could defend himself. What enraged me most deeply was that these carping muckworms not only embellished the negative facts about Poe's life, but that they crowded around the scene of Poe's death like little hungry flies. Here was the ultimate evidence, the crowning symbol- ran their logic- of a lifetime of moral frailty. Poe's dismal and low end served to confirm the darkness of his life and the imperfections of his morbidly inclined literary productions. *Think of Poe's miserable end*, groaned one paper.

Think of his miserable end!

Think not of his unprecedented genius? Not of his *literary mastery*? Not of how he sparked life in his readers at times when they felt none? Think of kicking a lifeless body into the gutter, and striking the cold forehead of a corpse!

Go visit that grave in Baltimore (the same paper advised) and receive from the very air around it the awful warning of this man's life to ours.

I announced one day that something must be done. Peter laughed.

"You cannot bring suit- the man is under the sod now!" said Peter. "You shall have no client! Let him rest; let *us* rest." Peter started whistling a popular tune. Whenever he was unhappy, he whistled, even if it was in the middle of a conversation.

"I tire of being hired for a little money to say or do other than what I believe, Peter. I made a commitment to

represent his interests. A promise, dear friend, and do not tell me that promises should end at someone's death."

"He likely agreed to your help only to keep you from badgering him on the matter." Peter saw that this statement bothered me and he pressed the point with a more sympathetic but insightful tone. "Is that just possible, my friend?"

I thought about something Poe had said in one of his letters regarding *The Stylus: This is the grand purpose of my life*, wrote Poe. *Unless I die, I will accomplish it*. Poe insisted in the same letter that I stop paying advance postage in our correspondence. He signed the letter "Your Friend."

And so I had written the same words to him- the same two simple words in plain ink, and signed my name below them as I would a dead-serious oath. Who would ever have argued then that I should not keep it?

"No," I answered Peter's question. "He knew I could defend him."