

POE

a play

by

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CHARACTERS: *

Poe

Bartender
Fortunato
Old Man

The Raven

Mugger
Policeman 1
Friend

James Jetsam
Dr. Flotsam
Policeman 2

Floozy
Elmira

Gert
Mrs. Clemm

Eleanora

*single-spacing indicates actors playing double and triple characters in the original production

Baltimore, October 2, 1849. A BARTENDER throws POE out of a bar and into the street and throws his cloak after him. As they argue, the bar crowd comes out to watch. They are GERT the barmaid, a FLOOZY, the RAVEN, and a man who later appears as a MUGGER. Meanwhile, Mr. JAMES JETSAM collapses dead drunk.

BARTENDER

Go on. Get going.

POE

Sir, you have done me an injustice. You are denying drink to a bridegroom-to-be.

BARTENDER

Mister, you pay or you push on, groom or no groom.

POE

I am perfectly able to pay. Today I may lack the wherewithal, but tomorrow, tomorrow—

BARTENDER

You come back tomorrow, and we'll talk about it.

POE

Tomorrow, I'll stand you all. I'll buy you all a drink tomorrow, on my wedding day.

MUGGER

Who are you marrying, the Queen of Sheba?

POE

I am marrying an exquisite woman, the fair Elmira.

MUGGER

That's a nice ring.

FLOOZY

You're sure getting in fine shape for your lady.

GERT

Aw, somebody buy him a drink.

RAVEN

Why don't you?

FLOOZY

The bride's so lovely, the groom drinks himself blind.

BARTENDER

You'd better get going, Mister.

POE

On my word, I will repay you tomorrow.

RAVEN

He won't last until tomorrow.

POE

I will last, forever! I am the author of "The Raven."

RAVEN

What do you mean? I am the Raven.

MUGGER

One of 'em is ravin'.

POE

No, "The Raven" is a poem. I wrote it.

RAVEN

How dare you? I wrote it.

POE

I am Edgar Allan Poe.

RAVEN

That's a lie. I am Egbert Allan Pome.

POE

You wrote "The Raven," eh?

RAVEN

You bet your life I wrote it.

POE

We will see who wrote "The Raven." "Once upon a midnight dreary"— what comes next?

RAVEN

The night was bleak and I was beery.

POE

Not quite. "While I pondered, weak and weary"—

That stinks. His is better.

FLOOZY

POE recites, falling into a trance. The others mock him. Then, uneasy that the strange man still speaks, they go off, leaving the BARTENDER alone with POE.

Over many a quaint and curious
volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping,
suddenly there came a tapping,
as of someone gently rapping,
rapping at my chamber door.

POE

Come in.

RAVEN

Who's there?

FLOOZY

The guy's crazy.

BARTENDER

“'Tis some visitor,” I muttered,
“tapping at my chamber door—
 Only this and nothing more.”
Ah, distinctly I remember
it was in the bleak December,
and each separate dying ember
wrought its ghost upon the floor.

POE

Boogie, boogie woogie.

RAVEN

Eagerly I wished the morrow;—
vainly had I sought to borrow
from my books surcease of sorrow—
sorrow for the lost Lenore --
for the rare and radiant maiden

POE

whom the angels name Lenore--
 Nameless here for evermore.

RAVEN

Take it off, Lenore, you little whore.

POE

And the silken sad uncertain
 rustling of each purple curtain
 thrilled me-- filled me with fantastic
 terrors never felt before;
 so that now, to still the beating
 of my heart, I stood repeating:

RAVEN

Have you heard the song about the barmaid? "Once there was a barmaid name of -- Gert!"

GERT

Get your dirty hand offa my—

RAVEN

Skirt!

POE

"'Tis some visitor entreating
 entrance at my chamber door--
 some late visitor entreating
 entrance at my chamber door;
 This it is and nothing more."

MUGGER

There's that door again.

BARTENDER

Is he still at it?

POE

Presently my soul grew stronger;
 hesitating then no longer,
 "Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly
 your forgiveness I implore;
 But the fact is I was napping,
 and so gently you came tapping,

tapping at my chamber door,
 that I scarce was sure I heard you"--
 here I opened wide the door;--
 Darkness there and nothing more.

BARTENDER

If you don't stop, I'm going to tap your mouth.

POE

Deep into that darkness peering,
 long I stood there, wondering, fearing,
 doubting, dreaming dreams
 no mortal ever dared to dream before--

MUGGER

He likes it dark.

BARTENDER

I'll make it dark for him.

The BARTENDER covers POE with his cloak
 and punches him to the ground.

BARTENDER

I gave him something to dream about.

From now on, except for the moment he gets
 mugged and until the moment he dies, POE
 exists within his imagination, moving between
 fantasy and memory, dream and delirium.

SCENE TWO

POE lifts his cloak. He is wearing a carnival
 mask. He calls out to the BARTENDER.

POE

Sir! My dear Fortunato. How fortunate that I should come upon you here in the midst of
 this mad carnival.

BARTENDER

What?

POE

How good to see you, Fortunato. Tell me, have you a costume for the carnival?

BARTENDER

Costume? I don't have a costume?

POE

O yes you do!

POE reverses the BARTENDER's apron,
making him FORTUNATO in a brightly colored
cloak.

FORTUNATO

How does it suit me?

POE

Splendidly. Here. Take this cap and bells.

FORTUNATO

Do I look jaunty?

POE

You cut quite a figure. I wish I had found you earlier. I know what a connoisseur of wine you are. Just this day someone offered me a keg of what passes to be Amontillado.

FORTUNATO

Amontillado?

POE

I have my doubt.

FORTUNATO

So would I. Nothing is harder to come by.

POE

I know. Nonetheless I took a chance and paid the full Amontillado price. I would have consulted you, but you were not to be found, and such an opportunity, if indeed it be such and not a swindle, is not to be passed by.

FORTUNATO

Do you really think it to be Amontillado?

POE

I was on my way to Luchresi to find out.

FORTUNATO

Luchresi?

POE

If anyone has a critical tongue, it is he. He will tell me—

FORTUNATO

Luchresi cannot tell the difference between Amontillado and Chianti.

POE

O, but some say his taste is a match for your own.

FORTUNATO

Come, let's go.

POE

Where?

FORTUNATO

To your vault.

They walk.

FORTUNATO

We don't need Luchresi. Luchresi is a poseur. He knows nothing about wines. Put a blindfold on the man and a glass of red from a peasant's table in front of his nose, and he'll tell you it's the finest Amontillado.

They reach POE's house.

POE

Ah, just as I thought, not one of my servants is here. I told them I would not be back until morning. I'm sure they have taken advantage of my absence and run off into the whirl of the carnival. A pity. One of them could have gone down and brought us back a glass. Now we ourselves must make the long walk down.

FORTUNATO

I'm ready. Shall we start?

POE

Are you sure? The place is unpleasant. There's an awful smell. And there are the bones. It's an ancient catacomb, you know.

FORTUNATO

That doesn't bother me a bit.

Not a bit? POE

No. FORTUNATO

Then watch your step. POE

They descend the stairs.

Is it much further? FORTUNATO

We have just begun. Do you observe the white webwork on the cavern walls? POE

What's that I smell? FORTUNATO

Potassium nitrate. Have some brandy? It will sustain you. POE

Delicate bouquet. I drink to your health. FORTUNATO

And I to yours. Aren't you feeling well? We should go back. I can always ask Luchresi. POE

No, no, I am fine. FORTUNATO

Then behold the catacomb. Another drink? POE

I mustn't dull my palate. If you insist. I drink to those who lie here. FORTUNATO

To those who lie here. And to your long life, Fortunato. POE

The smell has grown stronger. FORTUNATO

POE

Yes. We are just below the riverbed. The nitrate hangs like moss upon the vault. Do you hear that?

FORTUNATO

What? What's that?

POE

Drops of water trickling upon the bones, that's all.

FORTUNATO

May I have another little drink?

POE

Here. Kill the bottle.

Chanting over the bottle, FORTUNATO makes with it the sign of the cross.

FORTUNATO

You do not comprehend, do you?

POE

Comprehend?

FORTUNATO

You are not of the Brotherhood.

POE

The Brotherhood? Oh yes.

FORTUNATO

Of the Masons.

POE

Yes, yes. I am a Mason.

FORTUNATO

You? A Mason? Impossible. Show me the sign.

POE pulls a trowel out from under his cloak.

FORTUNATO

That's not—

POE

O yes, it is. This trowel is the sign.

FORTUNATO

You jest! Let's get back to the business at hand.

POE

Here we are. Within is the Amontillado.

POE and FORTUNATO stand before a vault.
POE gestures for him to enter.

FORTUNATO

O no, no, no, my good sir, after you.

POE

O no, after you, my dear Fortunato.

FORTUNATO

We will see whether this is the true thing or not.

POE pulls a gate down over the vault, trapping
FORTUNATO.

FORTUNATO

Another jest. Surely, you jest.

POE

A little joke.

FORTUNATO

It's a good one.

POE

I'm glad you like it.

FORTUNATO

Something to chuckle over when we get back.

POE

Yes, indeed.

POE pulls up a wheelbarrow full of bricks and
proceeds to wall FORTUNATO up within the
vault.

FORTUNATO

Won't they be waiting for us back at the palazzo?

POE

Yes. Shall we hurry back?

FORTUNATO

What are you doing? Let me out of here. I demand that you let me out of here. Please let me out. Let me out of here! Help, somebody, can you hear me? Help me! I'm in the cellar. I'm being walled up by a madman.

POE

By a madman?

FORTUNATO

You must admit this is a bit peculiar.

POE

Help me! I'm being walled in by a madman. Let me out of here.

FORTUNATO

Help me! Somebody help me!

POE

Help me, help me. O somebody help me, please.

FORTUNATO

For the love of God.

POE

Yes, Fortunato. For the love of God.

POE puts the last brick in place.

SCENE THREE

Alone in darkness, POE hears the voice of the
OLD MAN, his foster father.

OLD MAN

Have you been a bad boy?

POE

I have done nothing, Father.

OLD MAN

You were playing in the cellar again. Where is your little friend?

POE

My little friend?

OLD MAN

Pull down your pants. Do I have to do it for you?

POE

I have done nothing.

SCENE FOUR

POE is on the street, alone. The MUGGER enters and rolls him.

MUGGER

Hello, Mr. Raven. That's a nice ring you have there. And such a warm cloak. Raven, you're plucked.

SCENE FIVE

POE is unconscious. Two PHANTOMS, male and female, dance around him. A PHANTOM VOICE sings:

VOICE

By the lakes that thus outspread
 Their lone waters, lone and dead,--
 Their still waters, sad and chilly
 With the snows of the lolling lily--
 By the mountains-- near the river
 Murmuring lowly, murmuring ever,--
 By the grey woods,-- by the swamp
 Where the toad and the newt encamp,--
 By the dismal tarns and pools
 Where dwell the Ghouls,--
 By each spot the most unholy--
 In each nook most melancholy,--

There the traveler meets, aghast,
Sheeted memories of the Past.

The PHANTOMS billow a sheet over the
prostrate POE. ELEANORA appears within it.
Pulling the sheet in a wavelike motion, the
PHANTOMS recede, leaving POE and
ELEANORA alone together on a beach.

SCENE SIX

ELEANORA awakens POE. She tags him. He
chases her and catches her. They settle down
together on the sand.

POE

Listen to the surf, Eleanora. "We're children together." Do you hear it?

ELEANORA

It's beautiful, Eddie.

POE

The water rushes in, the angels sigh. Do you hear?

ELEANORA

And the giants in their caves of rock.

POE

They grind their teeth. The giants are imprisoned there.

ELEANORA

Let's make the giants' castle.

POE

No, my little cousin, no today.

ELEANORA

Let's play—

POE

Shall we play our burial game?

ELEANORA

Will the giants know?

POE

We'll never tell them. Lie still, Eleanora.

ELEANORA

Is this still enough, Eddie?

POE

You must be very still.

POE scoops sand upon ELEANORA's body
and smooths it over her.

ELEANORA

Am I still enough, Eddie? Cover me all over.

POE

All over.

ELEANORA

All over, Eddie.

POE

Lie still. Listen to the surf, Eleanora, and the low moaning of the tide.

ELEANORA

It's cold, Eddie.

POE

Hear the wind.

ELEANORA

Cover me.

POE folds ELEANORA's arms over her chest,
closes her eyes, and kisses her. He lies down
beside her. Darkness falls, followed by a new
light dappled with many colors. POE and
ELEANORA rise and stretch as if at the
beginning of the world.

ELEANORA

Here is our valley.

POE

Our valley apart from the world.

ELEANORA

Our valley of many-colored grass.

POE

In this vale beneath an endless sun

ELEANORA

No unguided footstep ever comes.

POE

To get here, many thousands of forest trees would have to be pushed back and many millions of fragrant flowers crushed.

ELEANORA

Our valley is shut off within giant hills.

POE

Shall we play in the River of Silence?

They play silently for a moment.

ELEANORA

If you splash, it makes no sound. See how deeply it runs.

POE

How motionless the pebbles on the riverbed. On the banks grow vanilla-perfumed flowers.

A bell rings offstage.

ELEANORA

What was that?

POE

A bluebell, just a bluebell. Look at this flower, Eleanora.

ELEANORA

What is it?

POE

Serpentine,
That aspiring flower that sprang on Earth
And died, ere scarce exalted into birth,
Bursting its odorous heart to wing
Its way to heaven, from garden of a king.

ELEANORA

It intoxicates me.

They kiss. Bells interrupt them.

ELEANORA

It's just our imaginations, isn't it?

POE

Everything is our imagination. Look at the groves now, Eleanora.

ELEANORA

They're the most beautiful of all, slanting gracefully toward the light.

POE

Their bark is speckled with ebony and silver and is smoother than all things, save only your skin, Eleanora.

ELEANORA

Serpents of Syria!

POE

Doing homage to their sovereign, the Sun.

Many bells ring.

ELEANORA

Those were real!

POE

Real as the Sun, the sovereign, calling his servants in.

ELEANORA

Eddie, let us stay here forever, in the Valley of Many-Colored Grass.

They embrace. Bells again and VOICES

ELEANORA

What's happening, Eddie?

FLOOZY

(offstage voice)

Not yet fourteen.

MUGGER
(offstage voice)

His cousin too.

DR. FLOTSAM
(offstage voice)

A lovely child.

ELEANORA

Hold me, Eddie.

OLD MAN
(offstage voice)

Support her. Can he support her?

POE

I hear trees being pushed back.

ELEANORA

And flowers crushed.

SCENE SEVEN

The WEDDING GUESTS enter. They carry bells, wear golden smiling masks, and move like automatons.

DR. FLOTSAM

Catalepsy, you know. An unusual case.

MRS. CLEMM

So young, so lovely.

POE

Congratulate me, friend. We're getting married in the morning.

DR. FLOTSAM

You're getting buried, and we're mourning.

POE

Are you coming to my wedding?

MUGGER

Who are you marrying, the Queen of Sheba?

FLOOZY

I'm so happy for you, Mr. Poe.

POE

Thank you.

FLOOZY

She is young. I know you care for her. She'll need it.

MUGGER

No more carousing, fella. You know what I mean.

POE

It's not like that.

MRS. CLEMM

Eddie!

They embrace.

POE

Auntie. I'm so glad. We'll always be together.

MRS. CLEMM

We won't abandon you, Eddie.

POE

I've got a place on Church Hill, newly done up and only five dollars a month. We'll have a garden. We'll make a good life together.

OLD MAN

What makes you think you can support a wife and her mother?

POE

I'll be making fifteen a week. That's more than enough.

OLD MAN

You never could hold a job. What makes you think you can now?

POE

I don't think you—

The OLD MAN moves away.

DR. FLOTSAM

An unusual case. You will have to take good care of her.

POE

I will.

DR. FLOTSAM

Recurrent catalepsy, you know.

POE

What?

DR. FLOTSAM

The appearance of death, a gradual wasting away.

MRS. CLEMM

She's a beautiful bride. I'm so happy for you. Have you thought about children?

OLD MAN

Yes, what if you have children?

POE

We'll get by.

OLD MAN

That's not what I mean. There's enough depravity in your family without you marrying your cousin.

Wedding music. The GUESTS form an aisle for POE and ELEANORA. The couple walks toward the minister: it is the RAVEN. With his wings, the RAVEN makes the sign of the cross over them. He screeches fiendishly and flies off. Only POE has heard him.

FLOOZY

The wedding was just lovely. Such a lovely bride.

DR. FLOTSAM

You must be very happy, Mrs. Clemm. An unusual son-in-law.

MUGGER

What is this, a teetotalers' wedding? I'd like to propose a toast.

DR. FLOTSAM

Hooray for the bride and groom!

OLD MAN

I hear the bride has a lovely voice.

FLOOZY

Sing for us!

MUGGER

Once there was a barmaid, name of Gert.

MRS. CLEMM

Shhh! The bride is going to sing.

ELEANORA

I'll sing your favorite, Eddie.

It was many and many a year ago,
 In a kingdom by the sea
 That a maiden there lived whom you may know
 By the name of Annabel Lee;
 And this maiden she lived with no other thought
 Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child
 In this kingdom by the sea,
 But we loved with a love—

ELEANORA coughs, then vomits blood.

MRS. CLEMM

O my God!

DR. FLOTSAM

It's the onset.

The GUESTS leave.

SCENE EIGHT

POE and MRS. CLEMM put ELEANORA, who is unconscious, upon a long black box, reminiscent both of a bed and a coffin.

They are silent. A pendulum clock is ticking. The DOCTOR enters and examines ELEANORA.

DR. FLOTSAM

She is failing.

MRS. CLEMM

What are her chances?

DR. FLOTSAM

She is going to die. Mr. Poe, may I give you your pain-killer?

POE

I don't want it. Last night, soon after you left, she came out—

DR. FLOTSAM

Of the coma?

POE

There was color on her cheeks.

DR. FLOTSAM

Were you there?

MRS. CLEMM

No.

DR. FLOTSAM

How often has the catalepsy recurred?

MRS. CLEMM

Five times or six, I have forgotten.

POE

Each time she has recovered.

MRS. CLEMM

Yes, and the vessel burst again. She is so changed. My daughter's skin has turned to wax.

DR. FLOTSAM

You will be relieved when all this is over. Inevitably it will be, very soon.

POE

Did you see? Her eyelids fluttered.

DR. FLOTSAM

No, I did not.

MRS. CLEMM

I didn't see it either, Eddie.

DR. FLOTSAM

I'm sure that you love her all the more for suffering her loss. Are you sure that you don't want—

POE

No. No pain-killer.

DR. FLOTSAM

A little laudanum would be a good idea.

POE

I said no.

MRS. CLEMM

Eddie, you need some rest.

POE

Auntie, I am not going to rest.

DR. FLOTSAM

You can rest right here. There's a comfortable chair.

POE

I want to go through this with her.

DR. FLOTSAM

(to Mrs. Clemm)

Would you bring some water?

(to Poe)

I don't think it would hurt you to have some laudanum. You have been up continuously for three days. Any other man would be exhausted.

POE

I want you out of here.

DR. FLOTSAM

(to Mrs. Clemm)

Hold the water.

The DOCTOR grabs POE, who fights loose.
POE is very strong.

POE

Get out of here!

DR. FLOTSAM

Have you been drinking?

POE

Get out!

DR. FLOTSAM

It's for your own good.

MRS. CLEMM

Doctor, you had better listen to him. Try to rest now, Eddie.

MRS. CLEMM leads the DOCTOR out. POE sits and watches the body. Thinking he sees movement, he rushes to it. POE opens the eyes and stares hypnotically into them. Nothing happens. Suddenly ELEANORA rises, giving a death-rattle moan. The clock ticks but doesn't tock.

POE

Eleanora! Angel, come back. Be with me.

POE hugs the body, then desperately tries to shake it into life. Finally he sees that ELEANORA is dead.

POE

Eleanora! Angel, I will come to you.

POE pours the whole bottle of laudanum into the water. He drinks it all. POE places himself beside ELEANORA's body on the box, then the poison in his belly drives him to the floor. From behind the box the RAVEN rises. He does a swooping death dance over POE's writhing body.

SCENE NINE

A blinding light. The RAVEN disappears. The OLD MAN enters.

OLD MAN

Drinking again! You're a disgrace. Get up off that floor. I send you to college and what do you do: run up gambling debts. You come home, to my house, and you drink yourself to death. You're not fit for the name of Allan, Edgar Poe. Do you have nothing to say for yourself? You fell into bad company, didn't you? I should have known. The son of an actress.

POE

I have done nothing. It is all your fault.

OLD MAN

That is the most ridiculous and insolent thing I have ever heard.

POE

You sent me to college like a pauper.

OLD MAN

I gave you more than enough.

POE

You gave me nothing to live on.

OLD MAN

You gambled what you had.

POE

I needed money!

OLD MAN

Don't you raise your voice at me.

POE

You won't listen. You talk as if you were simon pure, as if all the sins were on my head, hypocrite!

OLD MAN

You watch your words with me.

POE

Edward Collier is your son.

OLD MAN

What are you saying?

POE

You heard me. Edward Collier is your son.

OLD MAN

You don't know what you're talking about.

POE

I know Edward Collier. He's your son. And you cut him off.

OLD MAN

You have no business interfering in my personal affairs.

POE

You didn't dare acknowledge Edward. You never cared for me. You just wanted an heir who seemed legitimate.

OLD MAN

I needn't listen to this. You are not my son. I am cutting you off.

POE

Now that you've married a breeder.

OLD MAN

Son of a bitch!

POE

Of good breeding to be sure.

OLD MAN

There's good blood in the line of Allan.

POE

What do you know about blood?

OLD MAN

I know the depravity in your family.

I warn you.

POE

Your sister Rosalie.

OLD MAN

She's beautiful.

POE

OLD MAN

With the mind of a twelve-year-old. And look at your brother Henry. You thought he was a fine fellow. But he drank himself to death. Shall I tell you about your father?

For God's sake, pity me.

POE

The OLD MAN swings at POE with his cane.

Pity you! Get up off the floor.

OLD MAN

Don't hit me.

POE

OLD MAN

You whimpering baboon. Take it like a man. You don't even fight back.

The OLD MAN turns away. POE leaps on him and with the cane chokes the OLD MAN to death. POE has no sooner stuffed the body behind the black box, which is now a sofa, than there is a knocking. Two POLICEMEN are at the door.

SCENE TEN

Who's there?

POE

Police.

POLICEMAN 1

Just a minute.

POE

POLICEMAN 2

Open up.

POE

Coming. What can I do for you, gentlemen?

POLICEMAN 1

We were passing by your house, and we heard a scream.

POE

A scream? Really?

POLICEMAN 2

A scream. In this house.

POE

That's odd. I'm here by myself. I heard no scream.

POLICEMAN 2

We heard a scream.

POE

I was dozing. I might have screamed in my sleep. I had a nightmare. I've been reading one of those Gothic novels. They have an effect on me.

POLICEMAN 1

We'd like to have a look around, if you don't mind.

POE

By all means. Look anywhere you like.

POLICEMAN 1 approaches the sofa.

POE

O, if you'd avoid looking in that back bedroom, I'd appreciate it.

POLICEMAN 1

What's in the back bedroom?

POE

It's untidy. I haven't cleaned it.

POLICEMAN 1 goes to the back bedroom.

POE
(to Policeman #2)

Nice night.

POLICEMAN 1 returns.

POLICEMAN 1

We'd like to ask you a few questions.

POE

Have a seat.

They motion for him to sit.

POE

O, of course.

POLICEMAN 1

Who lives in this house?

POE

My foster father and myself. Unfortunately, my foster father is away at his estate.

POLICEMAN 1

I didn't ask you where he was. I just asked you who lives here.

POE

I guess I'm volunteering information.

POLICEMAN 2

Who screamed?

POE

I told you, I was having a nightmare, and I must have screamed in my sleep.

POLICEMAN 2

It sounded like a nightmare, all right. I suspect foul play.

POE

Foul play? Are you sure you're in the right house?

The POLICEMEN confer.

POLICEMAN 2

What do you think?

I think he's telling the truth. POLICEMAN 1

What do you want to do? POLICEMAN 2

Let's get out of here. POLICEMAN 1
(to POE)

Sorry to have disturbed you.

We know all we need to know. POLICEMAN 2

Gentlemen, no need to rush off. May I offer you some brandy? I know what a difficult job you fellows have, and I want to show you my appreciation. POE

We have to be going. POLICEMAN 1

Come on. Just one. POLICEMAN 2

POE pours them and himself a drink.

Has the night been eventful? POE

It's kind of slow. POLICEMAN 1

We got a thief. He thought he'd outsmarted us too. POLICEMAN 2

Outsmarted you? You need a refill. POE

That's all right. POLICEMAN 1

I'll have a refill. Just one, more. POLICEMAN 2

It's very strong. But good. POLICEMAN 1

POLICEMAN 2

Very good.

POE

Thank you. So the night has been quiet.

POE hears the sound of a heart beating.

POLICEMAN 1

Very quiet, yes.

POE

I suppose you have your ears to the ground.

POLICEMAN 1

We have to.

POE

What do you gentlemen do for amusement?

POLICEMAN 2

Shall we tell him?

POLICEMAN 1

No.

POE

I'll bet you have your conquests.

POLICEMAN 2

We get a few.

To cover up the heartbeat, POE recites:

POE

In Heaven a spirit doth dwell
"Whose heart-strings are a lute";
None sing so wildly well
As the angel Israfael,
And the giddy stars (so legends tell)
Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell
of his voice, all mute.

The POLICE applaud.

POLICEMAN 1

That's very nice.

POLICEMAN 2

Shakespeare?

POE bangs a chair in rhythm with the heartbeat,
which is getting louder and louder.

POLICEMAN 1

What are you doing?

POE

You act as if you don't hear.

POLICEMAN 1

Are you all right?

POE

You boys must think I'm pretty stupid. You're used to dealing with a certain element. But I'm not fooled. You might as well stop it right now. All right, I know you're doing it.

POLICEMAN 2

Doing what?

POE

Stop it! I don't hear it. I don't hear a thing. I don't hear it. Stop! All right, I confess.

The heartbeat stops.

POE

I killed the old man. He's behind the sofa.

The POLICE lift the sofa.

POLICEMAN 1

There's nothing there.

The POLICE disappear. The OLD MAN crosses
the stage laughing.

OLD MAN

Have you been a bad boy again, Edgar?

SCENE ELEVEN

POE is alone in darkness. He hears mocking laughter. Exploring his space, POE bumps into a wall. He feels the walls that surround him closing in. Then the ceiling begins to descend.

POE

Let me out of here. I demand that you let me out of here. Somebody help me. Help me! Let me out!

POE is wedged into a tight space when ELMIRA bursts in.

ELMIRA

My God, it's stuffy in here. You should let some air in, Edgar. I knew you would forget about meeting me at the tailor's. Don't you care about our engagement ball?

POE

I was composing a poem.

ELMIRA

Where is it?

POE

I was composing it in my head.

ELMIRA

I don't believe you.

POE

Elmira, when I write I lose all sense of time and place. And when I write about you—

ELMIRA

You flatterer.

POE

I needn't recite it, then. You'll say it's just flattery.

ELMIRA

Not I. Your last one was so beautiful:

My soul at least a solace hath

In dreams of thee and therein knows
An Eden of bland repose.

POE

Did I write that? This one is finer, I think.

ELMIRA

Yes?

POE

Elmira. . . Elmira. . .
Elmira, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea

ELMIRA

The weary, wayworn wanderer bore to his own native shore.

POE

How clever of you to anticipate me.

ELMIRA

I read that poem. In a book. It was called "To Helen."

POE

Heavens, I have plagiarized myself.

ELMIRA

Who's Helen?

POE

She was long ago.

ELMIRA

How long ago was that? Before our first romance? Really, Edgar, how many women have you written poems to?

POE

None, Elmira, that I love as I love you.

ELMIRA

Once I saw you and Eleanora together.

POE

Oh?

ELMIRA

It was obvious that you loved each other. I felt— if only I wasn't a married woman. But I banished that feeling from my heart as I would a poisonous serpent. I know how you feel, Edgar. I'm sure you still love Eleanora. I grew quite attached to my husband. But now there is no one left for us but each other. Edgar, why are you so silent? It is your fault that we went our separate ways?

POE

My fault?

ELMIRA

I would never have married another if you hadn't gone away to school.

POE

I wrote you every day.

ELMIRA

But I never received your letters. How could I help it if my parents—

POE

Why did your parents intercept those letters?

ELMIRA

They had to. Your foster father told them to.

POE

So that was my fault. I was no longer an heir. No wonder they slammed the door in my face. You couldn't marry a pauper. I'm sure, however, that now you are a wealthy widow, you will forgive me that fatal flaw in my character.

ELMIRA

If that's the way you feel about it, Edgar, we'd better terminate this relationship immediately.

ELMIRA starts to go. POE stops her.

ELMIRA

Let me pass, sir.

POE kisses her.

ELMIRA

O Edgar. You were just teasing me. Your hair is all mussed. You look like a wild man.

POE

A literary lion.

ELMIRA

I see. The ladies will stroke your mane. They'll say, "That Edgar Poe, what a romantic poet."

ELMIRA kisses POE.

POE

I have teeth, too.

ELMIRA

Edgar, we'll be so happy together. You'll have your magazine, your dream. It will establish. . . How did you put it?

POE

An aristocracy of the arts.

ELMIRA

Well, my aristocrat had best appear presentable.

ELMIRA begins to dress POE with clothes she has brought from the tailor's.

POE

Forget I said "aristocracy of the arts." I will simply be a man of letters.

ELMIRA

Why, that's everything, Edgar.

POE

Yes, it is. Elmira, you should know that all that really matters to a man of letters, and to a poet especially, is absolutely unpurchaseable.

ELMIRA

I'll stand behind you, dear.

POE

The dominion of intellect, the consciousness of power, the thrilling sense of beauty, the free air of Heaven, these are really all that a poet cares for.

POE sees what he is wearing.

POE

It's very cute. What am I supposed to be?

ELMIRA

Little Boy Blue. And I'm Little Bo Peep, silly.

POE

Little Boy Blue?

ELMIRA

Hurry up, Edgar, or we're going to be late.

POE

Heaven forbid.

ELMIRA

All of Richmond's finest will be there. Come on now, Edgar. Little Bo Peep is going to lead her little lost lamb back into the fold.

POE

Baaaa!

The GUESTS at the engagement ball are wearing
carnival masks. They greet POE and ELMIRA.

FORTUNATO

Hello, Elmira.

GERT

You look lovely tonight.

MUGGER

Exquisite, isn't she?

ELMIRA

Everyone, I want you all to meet my fiancé, Mr. Edgar Poe. Edgar? Edgar. Edgar is from New York.

POE

I was raised right here in Richmond.

MUGGER

A Virginia boy. A fine product of our fair state.

JETSAM

I want you to know that I enjoyed your novel, "The Raven."

GERT

Mr. Poe, I also admire your poem, "The Raven," and do you know, it left me with a curious question: Who is the real Lenore?

POE

Let's just say that she is my Dark Lady.

MUGGER

I know who she is: The Queen of Sheba!

ELMIRA

Edgar, I'd like to dance. Everyone, shall we dance?

FORTUNATO

Some music, please.

Dancing a quadrille, the GUESTS speak as they approach each other.

GERT

He dances very gracefully.

JETSAM

You wouldn't think he was an alcoholic.

GERT

Is he? I thought he was an opium addict.

MUGGER

How did Elmira meet him?

FORTUNATO

They were childhood sweethearts.

MUGGER

Lovers?

JETSAM

I hear that he's an orphan.

MUGGER

Really?

JETSAM

His parents acted in the theater.

Good God. MUGGER

You lucky fellow. FORTUNATO

Thank you. POE

She is quite a catch, you know. FORTUNATO

I'll bet she's loaded. JETSAM

Who was his first wife? MUGGER

His cousin. He married her before she was fourteen. FORTUNATO

The clock strikes eleven: an ominous sound. The DANCERS stop. The ghost of ELEANORA appears, wearing a white shroud and a golden wedding mask. She approaches JETSAM, who backs away. The dance continues, and partners change until POE finds himself dancing with the strange figure. They circle as the GUESTS and ELMIRA dance around them. The clock strikes twelve. Again, the DANCERS stop. POE and ELEANORA stand staring at each other. The DANCERS remove their masks.

Edgar, I'm tired. Take me home, please. ELMIRA

ELEANORA beckons to POE. POE moves toward her.

Edgar? Edgar! ELMIRA

ELEANORA's ghost turns and runs away. The GUESTS vanish.

POE chases ELEANORA around and around, then he catches her and removes her golden mask. ELEANORA spouts blood. The GUESTS return, swirling around them like a whirlpool. POE sinks to the ground. The GUESTS fly off.

SCENE TWELVE

ELEANORA's ghost has become the RAVEN. He swoops over POE as POE swoons.

CHANTING

(from offstage)

He is failing. He is failing. He is failing. He is failing.

POE

I have done nothing.

POE lies upon the street in morning light, The RAVEN is gone. The BARTENDER stands over him. A FRIEND passes, sees POE, and stops.

FRIEND

I know that man.

BARTENDER

Do you, now?

FRIEND

Yes, it's Poe. He's a literary man.

BARTENDER

He's litter on this street. Front of my bar, it looks bad.

FRIEND

Has he been drinking? He looks very sick.

BARTENDER

If I could pump him, I'd have a fortune.

FRIEND

Poor devil.

BARTENDER

Say, could you do something to take care of him, take him away, find the police, whatever you can do, I'd appreciate it. It's election day, and my tavern is a polling place, and it just won't look good to have this on the street.

FRIEND

Don't worry, here comes the sawbones. Over here! There's a man here!

BARTENDER

When you're done, have an eye-opener and cast your vote while you're at it. Drinks are free today. If you're a Democrat.

The BARTENDER goes into the bar as the DOCTOR enters.

FRIEND

What's he saying? Can you make it out?

DR. FLOTSAM

Just ravings.

They lift POE onto the black box.

FRIEND

What are his chance?

DR. FLOTSAM

He is going to die.

They leave POE alone. In his delirium POE imagines rats approaching him. He writhes. Now the rats are hands upon his body. They become the RAVEN's claws. Slowly RAVEN rises over POE, and, hovering, swings a lowering wing back and forth over POE like a pendulum. The pendulum is almost touching his heart when POE speaks.

POE

God help my poor soul.

Gently the RAVEN lifts POE onto his lap and, humming "Annabel Lee," rocks him asleep.

RAVEN folds POE's arms over his chest and slowly draws a wing over the body. Darkness.

