

the
lighthouse
at the
end of the
world



a novel

STEPHEN MARLOWE

Stephen Marlowe

THE
LIGHTHOUSE
AT THE END
OF THE
WORLD



A DUTTON BOOK

DUTTON

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published by Dutton, an imprint of Dutton Signet,

a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

Distributed in Canada by McClelland & Stewart Inc.

First Printing, October, 1995

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Marlowe, Stephen

The lighthouse at the end of the world : a tale of Edgar Allan Poe
/ Stephen Marlowe.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-525-94049-9

1. Poe, Edgar Allan, 1809–1849—Fiction. 2. Authors,
American—19th century—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.A674L5 1995

813'.54—dc20

95-15477

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Garamond

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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One

Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned!—to the earth art thou not forever dead . . . and a cloud, dense, dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven?

—“William Wilson”

“You are Mr. Edgar Allan Poe, are you not?”

I should, to be prudent, have said I was not. With his one twinkling eye—a patch covered the other—and his florid cheeks and the tracery of burst capillaries that colored his bulbous nose a violent purple, the captain of the steamboat *Columbus*, bound from Norfolk for Baltimore, was all too obviously a convivial man.

But how seldom I basked in the light of recognition! Besides, it had begun to rain and my deck passage did not entitle me to pass through the saloon's bat-wing doors, now almost filled by the captain's girth.

A sudden roll to larboard decided the issue by propelling me at him. Sidestepping nimbly for so large a man, he draped a meaty arm across my shoulders and convoyed me into the saloon before I could say a superfluous “I am.” But make no mistake; I did say it.

He said, “I never forget a face” and “portrait in the *Southern Argus*” and “not that I'm much for fantastical tales or poe-etry, ha! ha! ha!” as we penetrated blue streamers of cigar smoke and a clamor of masculine conversation that almost drowned out the thump of the paddle wheels.

When we reached the oak bar, most of the crowded room was

not visible except in the back-bar mirror, and for an instant this gave me the vertiginous notion that we, here on this side of the mirror, were the reflections, noisy and noisome in our imperfection, of a reality that, from behind the Negro bar steward's white-jacketed back, saw a sullied semblance of itself in the image of which I was a part. The notion passed, as such foolishness does, in the time it took the captain to introduce me to a fellow with Little Van side-whiskers and another whose name sounded like Rum, which by then I was drinking.

Just one drink, I assured myself. One convivial drink with the convivial master of the steamboat *Columbus*, Pompey Gliddon by name—for how could I prove to myself I could stop unless I started?

I wonder, have I started this narrative at its beginning or close to its end? These are the two accepted places, and they are mutually exclusive, so the point ought easily to be resolved. But the more I ponder it, the more I see how elusive the answer is.

I disembarked in Baltimore on the evening of September 28, 1849. I would never see the year 1850, nor even November of '49. Is it not then evident that the beginning I have made must be very close to the end indeed? And yet, I have used the word "narrative," and by it I mean no autobiographical maunderings. No, these pages are rather an attempt to account for those five days during which I disappeared, in my forty-first (and final) year, to be found by a publisher of my acquaintance on the floor of a tavern frequented by Irish immigrants and known as Gunner's Hall. Close to the end of my life though they are, did not those five days begin the moment I walked, rather to my surprise still ambulatory after imbibing most of a bottle of rum, down the gangway of the steamboat *Columbus*? But then how mutually exclusive *are* beginning and close-to-end?

The answers to certain other questions would be helpful. Where had I gone, those five days? And what done? And in whose company? I had been on binges before. Surely that was the sum and substance of it, a not very mysterious mystery. But then why, in hospital, in what little remained to me of afterwards, did I some-

times call myself Mr. Peacock?*

One question begets another, and on the wall behind the troglodytes the flames of their meager fire fling flickering shadows while the story-teller pursues his rhythmic, mesmerizing *and-then-and-then*, so like the beat of *Columbus's* paddle wheels (is not a tale a journey?), hoping to beguile his audience, or at least himself, into forgetting those unknown horrors lurking outside the cave long enough to confront the familiar horrors *inside*. For the story-teller knows this: A nightmare does not give rise to terror; rather, it is the other way around.

A tavern, then. I can be seen at the far end of the bar, hunched and shivering with the unseasonable cold. My white linen suit, so dapper when I lectured at Richmond and Norfolk, is now rumpled and sodden.

I am drinking gin and hot water, my fourth—in *this* tavern. That I have already spent or, in fumbling thick-fingered for it, possibly lost the money intended for my passage in the railroad cars to Philadelphia, now seems important only in that it means I cannot pay for my drinks. I have found myself in such predicaments often enough. The usual solution is to pass out. Pass out and they will search your pockets to ascertain that you are penniless before depositing you with no intemperate violence in the gutter or, better, summoning the police, who will deposit you in a cell, if not warm then at least dry, for the night. And the morning, with luck, will see to itself. Does this strategy bespeak a certain lack of *amour propre*? Perhaps. Yet why *not* pass out? Oblivion, however temporary, is the objective, after all.

The man tending bar has a dissipated face with dark unhealthy pouches under the eyes, rather like my own. A hazard of both our occupations? He wordlessly holds a hand out, palm up, a gesture both jaded and theatrical. Once in a similar situation I recited some lines from “The City in the Sea”—or was it “Ulalume”?—in the

* It cannot be said with any certainty whether or not Mr. Poe knew that the word for “peacock” in Old Norse is *poe*. (Editor’s note)

hope that someone would pass the hat. But I was hooted down and deposited outside rather more vigorously than had I merely pretended to pass out.

Aside from myself, a single patron remains in the bar-room, as if determined to outwait me for some reason I am too besotted to grasp. On the bar at his elbow stands a tall beaver hat, and his stone-gray topcoat is in the latest French fashion. Have I ever visited France? Alexandre Dumas insists, in writing, that I have been to Paris, venturing forth only at night like the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, but we shall come to all that.

I squint at the bar-tender's large, chapped hand. The index finger gestures—pay me. The bar-tender is a big man, and the hand becomes a fist. I begin to worry. As I have said, there are degrees of being thrown out.

Another hand, this one well manicured, enters the small space from which I shall soon be forcibly evicted. Deftly it inserts coins into the large red fist.

When I try to thank the altruist in the French topcoat, he waves me to silence. "I know what it is to be down on one's luck. Do you need a place for the night? Come, get your coat."

But I have no overcoat. At the door he unfurls a large umbrella and goes outside, where he waits; I can hear rain drumming on taut fabric. Soon I join him.

Sometimes anywhere is better than here.

A labyrinth of alleys. From the mouth of one I see by the light of a reluctant dawn the water of the harbor, flat black and oily under the rain, and on it a row-boat half sunk, or half afloat. My benefactor steers me by the elbow across a board-walk to a brick building. The ground shifts underfoot. I step warily back. But it is only a scale. The place is, or has been, a warehouse. Charred beams, once part of the roof, lie about, mute testimony to the fire last year in which more than sixty buildings were gutted. The door hangs by a hinge. Someone comes out, short, burly, in navy-blue reefer.

"This makes six for the night, I believe?" says my benefactor.

"Not until he says he's willing." The burly fellow appraises me in the dim dawn light. "He Irish?"

"You know me better than that," says my benefactor.

"Native-born, are you?" the burly fellow asks me. "Where?"

"Boston."

"Can you sign yer name?"

"I can."

"Or any other name?"

I shrug.

"Give me one."

"Rufus Griswold," I say.

"That *yer* name?"

"No."

"Give me another."

"Neilson," I say.

"*That* yer name?"

"No."

I am standing on the scale. It moves. It seems to be weighing me. Does it find me wanting? As my cousin Neilson has?

—And Rufus Griswold?

"A roof over yer head, most of a roof, leastways," says the burly fellow. "And victuals. Well? Yes or no?"

"Why not," I say.

"There, you heard him. Six," my benefactor says.

"Five, weren't it?"

"Six, including this one."

I hear the clink of heavy coins. Five. But the first had nothing on which to clink. So, six. Including me.

"The food won't poison you. I eat it myself sometimes," the burly fellow tells me with gruff compassion. "There's gin to drink. Rum if you like."

"What crime must I commit?"

"Vote. You will vote in the Congressional election."

Sound bubbles from me, a kind of laughter, to be inundated by the slosh of water against pilings and trod upon by my benefactor's

retreating footfalls. The exhilarating prospect of the unknown—and all it is is a Whig coop, from which, more than once no doubt, I shall exercise my right to vote.

The burly fellow averts his face from the puff of stale breath begot by my laughter. The laughter is all the volition I have left. I am literally unable to move until he shoves me, will-I, nill-I, into the building.

Two

It is now rendered necessary that I give the *facts*—as far as I comprehend them myself.

—"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"

I wish I could write that I heard, rising from the susurrant semi-darkness, snores, whimpers, wheezes, gnashing of teeth, maniacal cachinnation, and cries to chill the blood—auditory melo-dramatic artifice, in short, suggestive of some extravagant Gothic adventure in which I would play a stirring heroic role among the homeless, despairing souls in that coop. But truth constrains my pen.

The burly fellow's shove sends me reeling into a vivid stream of invective as the sleeper whose straw mattress and outstretched legs I have stumbled over comes exploding to his feet. Soon I find myself hemmed against the brick wall by a half-circle of threatening derelicts who study me as they might a specimen mounted in a museum where they have gone only to keep warm but which interests them in spite of themselves. It is the white suit, of course. Sodden, rumpled, stained, it never the less is eloquent of a bespoke bedizenment that awes them. I am utterly alien. I could have come from the antipodes. Or the moon.

Their awe spawns resentment; their resentment, anger.

"That be silk?" asks one.

"Nope. Linen," says another.

"He a sporting man, or whut?"

"Whut you want here, sporting man?"

"You sartin it's linen?"

"I know linen when I see linen."

"She-it." This scatological skeptic takes a sleeve of my coat between thumb and fingers. I consider an orderly retreat, but my back is already to the wall.

"Feels genu-wine," the skeptic allows, and my coat is stripped off me. Reaching to reclaim it, I see dawn seeping in through three small windows high on the harbor side of the building; see bearded faces; see black teeth and no teeth; see scars and mutilations; see, worst of all, in rheumy eyes, enjoyment.

"Give it here," says one.

But my white coat makes the rounds, seeming for a while to have quite disappeared until it surfaces on a corpulent man whose bulk splits it up the back.

My tormentors now are silent, and more frightening for their silence. My white stock goes next, its appropriation almost strangling me. My white shirt follows in two pieces, not including the lower half of one sleeve, the right, which still clings to my arm. I am shoved again against the wall, then yanked back amongst them. Tripped, I tumble onto my back, struggling to no avail as both my shoes go. They are old shoes, but under caked mud they are undeniably white. Who among my tormentors has ever worn white shoes?

"A mite skinny in the shanks."

"Give them trousers here."

A tug-o'-war, which the white trousers cannot possibly survive, begins.

Those not participating flop me over, face down, and now I do hear one of those cries to chill the blood.

In the silence that follows, a voice speaks. The words are few. "That will be enough now. You've had your fun."

It is no loud voice, nor is its tone commanding. Rather, it conveys a burdensome ennui.

Muttering, one by one my tormentors remove themselves.

The agency of my deliverance is a tall man deep of chest and broad of shoulder. Looming above me, he looks a giant.

As he helps me up, I see on his face a welted scar, crescent-shaped, that runs from the corner of his eye to his chin.

"Pretty, is it not?" he says.

I make a meaningless sound.

"You've been hazed, but that's the end of it," he tells me. "It's too early in the morning for such a hullabaloo. Here, these came off a dead man."

A pile of unspeakably filthy rags is thrust at me, and the scar-faced man withdraws without further word.

Meanwhile my tormentors have formed two disorderly ranks that shuffle toward a trestle table at the far end of the room, where the burly fellow in the reefer presides over a great steaming pot. It occurs to me that perhaps the meal, not the scar-faced man, has been responsible for my succor. But then I see him stride past the waiting men, see those closest to the table immediately make room for him.

He is, I learn later, a merchant seaman called Monk. Any group of men, however ill-assorted, will acknowledge a leader, and here it is Monk. In matters of discipline, even the fellow in the reefer—are they shipmates from another life?—defers to him.

I scrutinize my new wardrobe: a gray flannel shirt; trousers of grayish and patched—and befouled—cassimere, too large; a frayed rope for a belt; an out-at-elbows coat of once-black alpaca; and a pair of venerable boots, their soles coming apart and lined with folded newspaper like rotting *papier-mâché*, their stench worse than that of the trousers. But as I am cold—have never been so cold—I put on these garments, redolent of how many elections past I have no wish to know.

Oh, yes; I almost forgot. I was hatless, but now I have a hat. Of the cheapest sort called palm-leaf, with no band and badly soiled. I study it, as these men have studied me, like a specimen in a museum, then clap it—a good fit—on my head. And I laugh.

A hat. I have more than I started with.

I shuffle forward between two charred stanchions to the feeding trough, in my nostrils the stink of the rags I wear, the stink now of myself. For clothes make the man, do they not?—like the terrifying figure in “The Masque of the Red Death.” Unmasked, he is nothing. Literally. The costume is all there is. That, and death to those who strip it away. I know another story about a masque. When the clock strikes midnight and the revelers reveal their faces, a woman asks her partner to remove his mask too, the most frightening mask of all. And he says, still dancing with her in his arms, I wear no mask. Does she drop dead of terror? I am uncertain of the ending, for it is someone else’s story. Endings often trouble me, whether mine or others’. Endings, it has been said, are my weakness. Because I believe a tale should not close at the end, but rather open, like a morning glory to the sun? Then why have I not written many tales that do so? Perhaps I shall.

Is the end of something not the beginning of something else—even the most endful of ends, death, the beginning of all that time when you will *be not*? But I must desist from such speculation. For I can see the words of the critic, like the handwriting on the wall: “Poe will never command the wide readership his genius deserves because he leaves beneath and behind him the wide and happy realm of the common and cheerful life of man to deal in mysteries of ‘life in death.’ ” And death in life, I suppose?

That wide and happy realm of the common and cheerful life of man; of a single individual, let us say; of me, or of you—can you see it, perhaps as thousands and thousands of daguerreotypes flashing by, each one establishing irrefutably that you exist because you were *there* when the camera’s shutter opened; each one as unique as the moment it records because, like that moment itself, it cannot be duplicated?

In barely a decade, how Monsieur Daguerre’s fabulous invention has revolutionized the world! And yet. And yet—isn’t the very uniqueness of each daguerreotype a drawback? Daguerreotypes cannot be broadcast like seed grain, or reprinted endlessly like the written word. Well, you say, there is a competing process developed in

England, less pin-sharp but capable of endless reproduction. Yes, but. (Is there not invariably a yes-but wherever science is concerned?) The competing process, called calotype, produces an original image that reverses reality, making of darkness light and of light darkness. Or have our senses deceived us until now?

The advent of the photograph and the steel pen almost exactly coincide. Is there a warning here—again the handwriting, or photograph, on the wall—that words and pictures are doomed to battle for the minds of men?

However that may be, M. Daguerre's fabulous invention, or that of his English rival, will supersede mere human memory, and a good thing too. For is not memory the most capricious of servants, storing chaotically the minutiae of every human life in a filing system with no rhyme and less reason, so that something you see or hear, be it singular or commonplace, even something you smell, say the aroma of molasses, dark, thick blackstrap, which I can smell now as I reach the trestle table on which remain a few chunks of bread slathered thickly—something you see or hear or smell sends you to plunge into those thousands and thousands of daguerreotypes inside your head to withdraw one.

Three

There arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

—*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

Soot-darkened red brick flanked a spotless white stoop, the marble glittering in a sudden shaft of sunlight that seemed for a moment to greet my arrival before the clouds closed in again, turning the sultry afternoon to virtual night.

Thunder crashed and I let the door knocker fall. The door opened to reveal a girl of nine or ten who looked up at me and screamed.

At the thunder? At my smile?

Was the smile perhaps suggestive of a death's head? In the four months since I had been drummed out of West Point I had eaten little, become emaciated.

The door shut in my face. Rain came down in torrents, in buckets. The door opened. The little girl said, "Hen—Henry? But you're upstairs in bed!"

I inserted my foot to prevent the door from shutting a second time.

"Henry is here in Baltimore? My brother Henry?"

The girl's oval face tilted up at me. "You're Eddie? My cousin Eddie?"

"Virginia? Who is there?" a voice called, and my cousin Virginia called back, "A man, Muddy—he says he is Eddie."

"Land, child! Then bring him in."

The voice, deep for a woman's, belonged to my aunt Maria Clemm, my dead father's sister.

I went in dripping wet behind the child. My aunt Maria wore a white widow's bonnet and a black dress, much pleated. She was tall, with the broad shoulders and broad, beetling brows of a man. Some have said she looked like my grandfather, General David Poe, who had been a friend of Lafayette and, possibly, of Washington himself.

Maria Clemm took both my hands in her strong square mannish ones. "Let me look at you." She looked at me. "Have you been starving yourself?"

"Well," I said, "it was not my plan to do so."

I soon was seated on a hard-backed chair at a bare wood table, envisioning platters piled high with thick slices off a pork roast, and cold veal, and meat pies. I was twenty-one and still an optimist and, as my aunt had surmised, starving. My stomach growled. Virginia giggled. My aunt Maria cut slabs of dark bread, yesterday's, and slathered on the blackstrap, then stood behind me toweling my hair while I ate. Virginia sat wide-eyed with elbows on table and chin on hands, watching me.

"Bring your cousin coffee."

It came thin and bitter in a chipped mug, but steaming.

Maria Clemm clucked her tongue. "You are so thin the cords stand out in your neck." Her hands were gentle. My aunt was, the evidence of her appearance and voice to the contrary, a very female person.

"We do not have much, Eddie," she told me, "but until you get back on your feet you will share what we have."

"That's what she told Henry," my cousin Virginia said. "Last winter."

"Virginia," her mother admonished.

"Are you as ill as he is?" Virginia asked.

"Now, Virginia, that is quite enough."

"Mr. Jeffries says Henry leads a untemperate life."

"Young lady, you are not to listen to the idle talk of our boarder."

"Mr. Jeffries says that is why he has the consumption. Henry."

Maria Clemm slapped her daughter, not hard, on the side of the head. Brown braids swung. Virginia wailed.

"Bronchitis," my aunt said. "Henry has a touch of bronchitis."

He sat up in bed, wearing not sleeping attire but a black shirt and stock. We both usually wore black, my brother Henry and I; I cannot say why. Perhaps the dignified look it imparted belied "untemperate" living.

Henry—or William Henry Leonard Poe, to give him all his names—did not rise. He laughed his greeting at me, a happy sound that ended in a deep, rolling cough that contorted and reddened his face. "Drink," he managed. There was a water jug, a tumbler. I poured, offered. He shook his head and coughed. And coughed. His eyes, of that indeterminate color neither gray nor hazel, looked beseechingly at me. I had not the faintest idea what to do until his hand groped toward the floor. There, under the bed, I found the corked bottle of corn liquor. I poured a more than generous measure into the tumbler and he drank it off, and, magically, the cough subsided and the redness left his face except for the hectic spots in his cheeks.

"And they say whiskey is bad for you," he observed. Weak but still mellifluous voice. Broad Poe forehead and wide-spaced Poe eyes under heavy brows. Aquiline, almost Hebraic, nose, small mustache, no side-whiskers. We looked like brothers; or like the same person.

My brother always claimed he could remember our father, a hard-drinking actor who deserted the family when I was not yet two. It is possible; Henry would have been four then. Our mother, an impecunious but acclaimed actress, died of consumption while playing in Richmond the following year. Henry was raised by General Poe and by the general's daughter, Aunt Maria, and went to sea young; I was taken in by admirers of my mother, the Allans. At any rate, the woman was an admirer. I shall have more, alas, to say of the Allans later.

Henry looked at me mockingly. "Are you a general yet, like Grandpa?" He offered me the bottle. I drank.

"Aunt Maria allows you whiskey?"

"Friends bring it. She pretends not to know."

I returned the bottle. Henry drank.

"I have been court-martialed," I said.

Henry laughed his happy laugh. No cough this time. "I never expected you to graduate from the Point. You were too long in the ranks, hating officers, ever to *become* one."

He returned the bottle. I drank.

"I wished to resign, but Mr. Allan would not permit it."

"So you arranged your own court-martial."

The bottle moved, was offered, tilted, returned. Before long it was empty and Henry pointed floorward; farther under the bed I found another.

"There were in all twenty-three charges of gross neglect of duty and disobedience of orders, over a period of twenty days. Also, I became inebriated at Benny Haven's Tavern."

Henry laughed; no cough. The corn liquor had given his eyes a liquid sheen. I felt light-headed.

"And did you derive any benefit from it?" he asked.

"The court-martial?"

"The Point."

"I can dissemble and clean a Hall carbine in pitch darkness."

"I assume you mean 'disassemble.'"

"What did I—oh."

We were both smiling when Henry withdrew from behind his pillows a cumbersome firearm with an oversized hammer and a cluster of barrels. I threw my arms up melo-dramatically.

"Ever seen one of these?" he asked. "My good-luck piece. A bar-hammer pepperbox pistol manufactured by the gunsmith Elisha Haydon Collier in the early twenties. Not many were made."

"Why your good-luck piece?"

"Because when I was in Marseilles I survived its best efforts to kill me. There was a girl, a most beautiful girl named Nola. . . . Well, I shall tell you about it some time." Henry replaced the Collier pistol behind his pillows. He was like that; he often did not finish a story he started. He said: "Mr. Allan is still richer than Croesus, is he not?"

"He inherited substantial parts of the Commonwealth of Virginia."

"And you are destitute?"

I shrugged.

"Why not go and see him?"

"My foster father is a businessman. He has an intense dislike of 'geniuses.'"

"I still say see him."

"Perhaps I shall, at the right moment."

But there was never a right moment for me and John Allan.

"You have been writing?"

With a wave of my hand I dismissed the question.

"Writing," said Henry, "is another way of traveling. More difficult than mine, perhaps, but not so easily prey to the frailty of the flesh."

Henry was for several years a seaman aboard the frigate *Macedonian*, sailing to the Mediterranean and South America. He began to reminisce. In Caracas an Indian had tried to sell him a white three-toed sloth with a red ribbon in its hair. He had smoked hashish in a den on Mount Pagus above Smyrna. He had dallied with Italian