

THE TRIALS OF EDGAR POE

A son of Charles Ellis recalled an evening at the Allans' house, while a few guests sat quietly at card tables: Edgar covered himself with a sheet and carrying a long cane entered the room as a ghost, intending, Ellis said, "to frighten the whole body of whist players, who were in truth stirred to a commotion."

— Kenneth Silverman, in *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*

A starstruck audience — Richmond, Virginia,
at November's end — had seen the tale
unfolding in Eliza's ruined looks, her now-grave,
all-too-gaunt appearance: all was black.
In days, her children would be motherless,
sent off to separate households, one more actress

cut from the performance's last act.
Edgar, not yet three, stayed in Virginia:
Mrs. Allan — ailing, childless,
and no relation — sought to change the tale's
too-tragic twist, had worn away his black
mood till, at last, John Allan nodded gravely,

wealthy, merchant Scot who, to the grave,
detested his most charitable act.
Later, in London, window-panes filmed black
with coal-soot servants scrubbed away — not Virginia
by a longshot — Allan found his vital
interests under threat, the market less

robust than he'd believed, soon to collapse. Less
vital was the boy who gravitated,
wide-eyed, to the parrot with its telltale
squawk and garish crest, bought to distract
the troubled wife, expatriate Virginian
homesick and housebound. But when those black

years passed, John Allan once more in the black
through an inheritance, the boy was less
than England's Edgar Allan: in Virginia,
he was Edgar Poe, Eliza's gravestone
and a father's disappearing act
his mournful legacy, the sick wife's battle

lost beneath her husband's dour gaze. . . . The brittle
truth: *He's no one's son*. One night, the black
halls steeped in shadow, Edgar felt that fact,
the specter of his own fears: bodiless,
he shrieked, sheet-covered, frightening those graven
images at whist, cards spilled, Virginia's

scions spooked and startled, Allan on the verge
of apoplexy, blackest cataract
at which Poe laughed, now fatherless to the grave.