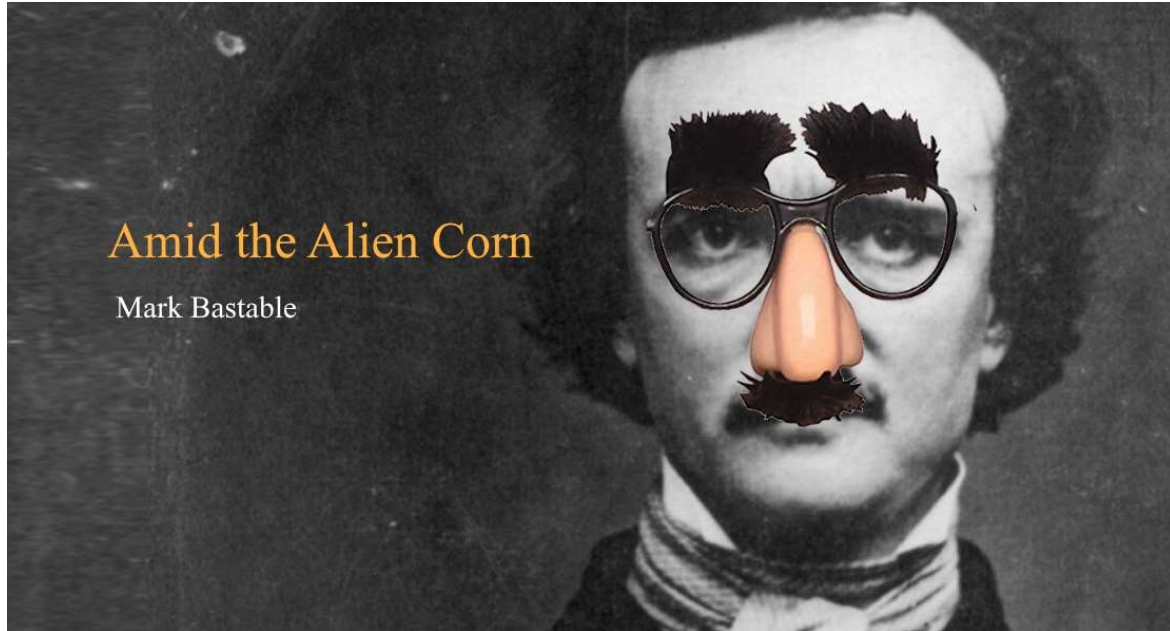


THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



As Poe later explained, his intention was “to create a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.”

*Prof. Nathan Dale, **Poe: A Life Apart***

“Professor Dale?”

The bespectacled, gray-haired gentleman peered up from his volume of Homer, blinking at the young woman addressing him. She looked for a moment like Helen of Troy.

Professor Dale shook off that unbidden impression and got to his feet.

“That’s me, yes.”

“Follow me please. Mr Pilszki has asked me to take you to the Casablanca Suite.”

She showed him to a spacious conference room – long shiny table, framed posters of Bogart, a clear view of the freeway. Professor Dale had never before visited the offices of a major film studio, but this was pretty much what he’d imagined as he’d sat in his paid-for first-class seat on the plane from Cambridge, Mass.

“Help yourself to coffee,” said Helen as she sailed out of the room. “Mr Pilszki will be with you in a moment.”

Professor Dale approached the incomprehensible coffee machine. It looked, he thought, like some kind of insane object by Duchamp. He reached for a bottle of mineral water.

His wife had been most impressed at the thought of him being flown out to Hollywood.

“Be sure to call and tell me about all the stars you meet. They say Chris Pratt’s lined up for the lead role.”

“I’m supposed to be there a few days a month to act as a...” He glanced down at the letter. “...Poetry Consultant. I don’t think I’ll be dining with the prospective cast.”

“Well, good. Apparently Emma Watson’s slated for the Lenore part – and I certainly don’t want that little minx anywhere near you.”

Professor Dale was flattered, as always, by his wife’s assumption that the very sight of him would turn any female into a ravening home-wrecker, but he reminded her that in thirty years of teaching English Literature to some of the most attractive and intelligent young women in Academia, he had not once come home with so much as his necktie askew. She was delightedly reassured. She gave him a package of sandwiches so that he didn’t have to eat any airline food that might trigger his allergies.

Twenty-four hours later in Hollywood, the door of the conference room burst open and in bounded Mr Pilszki, bearing down on Professor Dale like the wolf upon the fold – although his cohorts, in contrast to those of Byron’s Assyrian, were gleaming not in purple and gold but in charcoal pinstripe and expensive silk ties – one azure, the other taupe.

The Senior Executive of Cosmos-Sterling Studios grabbed the Professor’s hand. “You’re Nathan, right? Nathan Dale? My daughter tells me there’s nothing you don’t know about poetry. Call me Jack. You want a coffee? Or how about hot tea? You college pussies are crazy for hot tea – am I right? Me, I don’t get a quart of Joe inside me before the first meeting of the day, I just keel over and die. Take a seat.”

He introduced his colleagues – Junior Deputy Vice Presidents of something or other – but Dale forgot their names as soon as he heard them. Caught squarely in the searing blast of Jack Pilszki’s personality, the Professor was having trouble remembering even his own name.

“So, Nate,” said Jack, leaning forward with his elbows on the long conference table, “you know why we asked you to make this trip, yeah?”

“I think so. You’re planning a movie based on *The Raven*, and you’d like occasional consultancy from an expert on Poe to contribute some contextual...”

“Exactly. The problem with that poem – you wanna know? All the action happens off-camera. We need to put the action right there where the audience can see it. I’m thinking we open with the castle in a raging storm...”

“Castle?” Dale asked. “There’s no mention in the text of a castle.”

“Really?” Jack stopped short, perplexed. “Are you sure? Where does the guy live then?”

“Er – it doesn’t specify.”

Immediately Jack brightened up again. “Then why not a castle?”

“Umm, I suppose so.”

“Plus a castle will make an awesome façade for the tie-in theme-park ride,” Taupe suggested.

“A theme-park ride? I...”

“So we open on the castle. We track through the window – like, homage to *Kane*, you get me? – and there’s our MC – maybe we call him Eddie Allen – and he’s tying off his arm with a rubber tube and reaching for a syringe of dope.”

“Dope?” Dale asked, flabbergasted. “You want to make him a junkie?”

“It’s the movies, Nate. You have to have an external representation of inner turmoil. And all those old guys were on dope anyway – am I right? They were all snorting and smoking and ripping it up. Yeah?”

Dale nodded dubiously. “There was arguably a culture of...”

“Exactly. Don’t worry – it’ll all be very tasteful. Very dark and gothic. No crass sensationalism. That’s why I got you on the case.”

“Thank you.”

“So – he shoots up and then we fade to flashback.” Jack tapped a finger on the table. “This is where we get the hook of the movie – like, the Real Story Behind Poe’s *The Raven*. With me?”

“Thus far,” Dale said.

“I’m thinking a Christmas scene set in, like, olden days. Big skirts and tight britches. Ice skating maybe. We follow this one chick across the frozen pond – she’s all innocent smile and rosy cheeks.”

“And a huge rack,” Azure put in.

“A huge rack we take as read,” Jack said, not breaking stride. “Smile, cheeks, rack – check.”

“And this is Lenore?” Dale asked, hoping he’d missed the point.

“Of course it’s Lenore. Lovely, wholesome, virginal Lenore.”

Taupe shrugged. “Though obviously we can’t call her Lenore.”

“No, no,” Jack said, irritated at having the self-evident pointed out. “Obviously not Lenore. What kind of a grandma-licking name is that?”

“How about Britney?” Azure said.

“Or Brandy?” Taupe countered.

Jack turned to Dale. “You see what I have to deal with? Nate – give me a classy name for this chick.”

Professor Dale swallowed hard.

“Eleanor?” he ventured.

“Too white-bread Washington.”

“Lena?”

“Too Hispanic.”

“Leila?”

“Bingo! I love it! See – that’s why you’re on the team.” Jack turned to Taupe. “Write that down. That’s freaking genius. Layla! And put a call in to Clapton for soundtrack leverage.”

Dale winced. He wondered how he could wriggle out of this job. Whatever happened, he was stuck in the Casablanca Suite until at least lunchtime.

Over the following hour Jack extemporized the outline of the movie: the protag was going to be a student doctor, yeah? Or – no, no – a gynecologist. See – if you make him a gyno, you get to show ass. And every ass on screen is worth two million asses on seats – fact. So the protag’s kinda upscale and the Layla chick is – what? – she’s a humble veterinary nurse. Downtown girl, uptown guy – am I right? Except he’s riding his pedal-bike along a country lane and – here’s the smart part – he runs over a raven. He takes the busted-up bird to...yeah, yeah. You’re ahead of me.

“Are we totally committed to the raven?” asked Azure.

Jack nodded, concerned. “I know what you’re saying. It’s a kind of a downer. Difficult to make a cute Happy Meal toy out of a raven.”

“We need an uppier, funner bird,” Taupe said. “I’m thinking – parrot? Macaw?”

“Too comedic.”

“Eagle? Albatross?”

“Too – like – mythic. Is there such a thing as a hip bird? Nate?”

Professor Dale got to his feet. “I’m really sorry, but I can’t be a party to this.”

“Ah.” Jack Pilszki. “You’re married to the raven idea.”

“No!” Dale rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. “I mean – yes. But it’s not just that. It’s the whole approach. It’s the wet nightgown scene. It’s the narrator’s French maid coming in every ten minutes with a clearly-labelled bottle of E&J Gallo. It’s – for God’s sake – it’s the whole sub-plot of Jesse James hiding out in the basement with the proceeds of a bank heist.” The Professor shook his head. “With all due respect, I can’t have my name associated with such an abomination.”

There was a long, tense silence. Azure and Taupe glanced anxiously at the Senior Executive of Cosmos-Sterling Studios, but they didn’t move a muscle. Then Jack Pilszki spoke.

“Professor – when I asked my daughter which guy at Harvard knew the most about poetry, she didn’t hesitate. ‘Nathan Dale,’ she said – right out, like that. Rachel told me how you love the words on the page. How you even love the pages. She told me you spend hours restoring books – re-gluing them and re-covering them. You know what I said to her? ‘Why not just buy new copies?’” Jack sniffed, shrugged, topped up his coffee. “And when I said that, I saw contempt in her eyes. Contempt for me – because all I know is movies and she thinks movies are dog-crap.”

Dale opened his mouth to speak, but Jack held up a silencing hand.

“The kids I make movies for, Nathan – they don’t read any poetry. If they’ve ever heard of Ezra Pound, they think he’s Alabama’s challenger for the WWWF Smack-Down title. I’m not ruining Poe for those kids, because they’ll never know the difference. And I don’t think I’m ruining it for you either, because there’s no way you’d pay to see this movie.”

Professor Dale looked down at the table. “You’re right,” he murmured. “I wouldn’t.”

Jack put out his hand.

“No hard feelings, Professor,” he said. “I respect what you do. But I respect what I do too.”

“You’re a generous man,” Dale nodded.

“You got that right. I said we’d pay you for your input, and I’ll stick by that. Ask at the desk and they’ll give you your check.”

As the Professor headed towards the door, Jack Pilszki was already back on track.

“So, ‘quoth’ I like. It has profile. Within a month every kid on Whatsapp’ll be using it. But ‘nevermore’? That has cobwebs hanging down. That’s, like, oil-lamps and dipfreakingtheria. We need the damn bird to say something with some street-smarts going on. We need a word kids can relate to.”

At the desk along the corridor Professor Dale asked Helen of Troy for his check. Jack was probably right. ‘Nevermore’ was not a word you often heard around the skateboard parks. ‘Quoth’ didn’t feature in many rap songs.

In his head, Nathan recited the words of the poem.

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore...*

He smiled. It occurred to him that you could practically hear the flat-four beat of a bass drum behind that thumping trochaic octameter.

“Here you are, Professor,” said Helen, handing him a check.

“Thank you.” He looked at the figure. It was huge. “Oh – no. Sorry. I just need to be paid for today. I’m not going to be fulfilling the whole contract.”

She frowned. “Er – yuh. That *is* for today.”

Nathan looked at the check again. It was three times the entire quarterly budget for acquisitions at the library. He thought about the tatty, disintegrating books in his care. Rachel was wrong – if he could have afforded new copies, he’d’ve bought them. Gluing errant pages onto crumbling binding was not his idea of a fulfilling Sunday afternoon.

The professor turned and marched back along the hall. He flung open the door. Jack Pilszki looked up.

“You forgot something?”

“Yes,” Nathan said. “I forgot what Poe was trying to do.”

* * * *

Two years later, Nathan Dale became, at fifty-eight years of age, the oldest man ever to win a Grammy for writing the lyric of a hip-hop song, the theme to that year’s biggest movie.

“It’s all in the title, baby,” Jack Pilszki said as he and Nathan looked up at the marquee in Time Square on première night. “And you nailed a beauty. It’s memorable; it’s quirky; it’s cute; and it’s hip as all get-out.”

“It’s pure corn,” Nathan said, smiling. He and Jack high-fived as the name of the movie lit up in purple and green neon, word by word.

Quoth the Penguin, “Nevermind.”

Nathan thought Edgar might even approve.