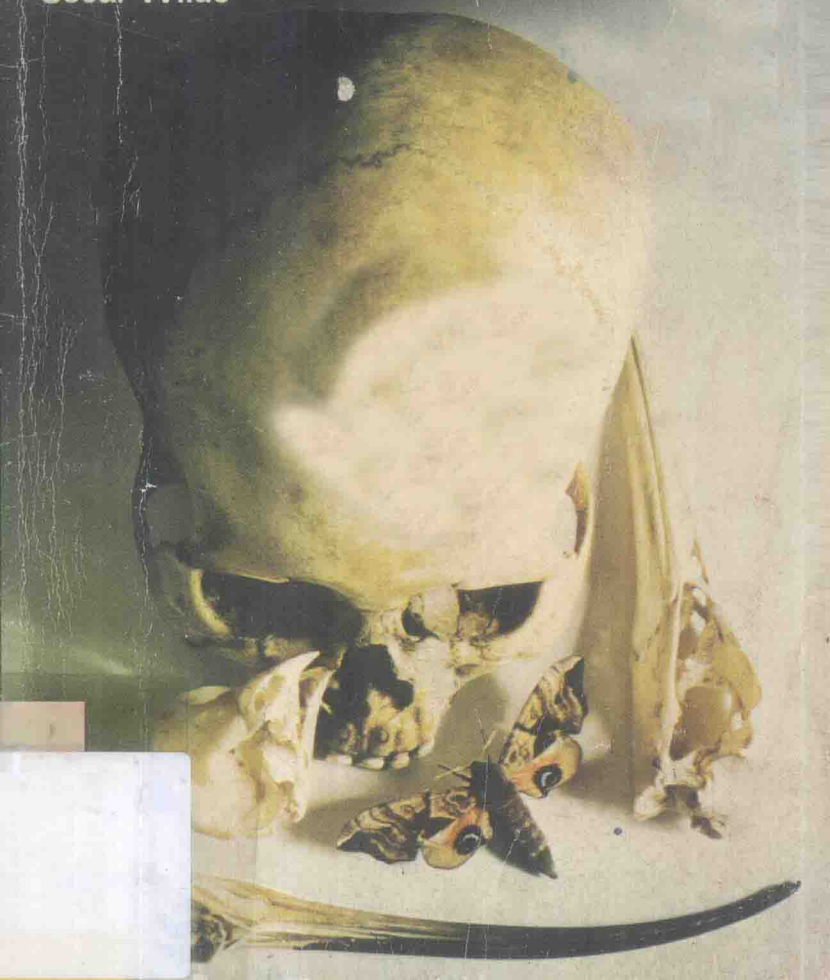
THE MOTH
AND OTHER STORIES

H G Wells Somerset Maugham
Edgar Allan Poe James Thurber
Oscar Wilde



THE MOTH
AND OTHER STORIES

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Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49), an American writer, was the inventor of the detective story. In addition he wrote many stories that are remarkable for their excitement and horror, and are certainly not for nervous people. Two of the best of these are *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. He was also a skilful poet and 'The Raven', in particular, is a poem that combines music in words with a mysterious story. Poe drank himself to death.

The Tell-Tale Heart

Edgar Allan Poe

TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing keen. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Listen! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once thought of, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it saw me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to kill the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what care—with what cunning I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And, every night, after midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh, so gently! and then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lamp, all closed—closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you

would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lamp cautiously —oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin beam fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who angered me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the room, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very clever old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute-hand moved more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I *felt* the extent of my own powers—of my wisdom. I could scarcely control my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was—opening the door—little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret actions or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as night with the thick darkness (for the shutters were tightly fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on, steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lamp, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed, crying out—Who's there?

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening—just as I have done, night after night, listening to the insects in the wall. Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no ! it was the low sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when filled with fear. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has risen from my own heart, deepening, with its dreadful noise, the terrors that disturbed me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing on him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor, or it is merely the sound of a cricket. Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these hopes; but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him, had walked with his black shadow before him, and surrounded the victim. And it was the influence of the unseen shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to *feel* the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I decided to open a little—a very, very little hole in the lamp. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how quietly, quietly—until, at length, a single dim beam, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the hole and full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue, with a horrible film over it that chilled my bones; but I could see

nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the beam as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is only over-keenness of the senses?—now, I say there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when wrapped in cotton. I knew *that* sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum forces the soldier into courage.

But even yet I kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lamp motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the beam upon the eye. Meantime the hellish beating of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well?—I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety frightened me—the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud cry, I threw open the lamp and leaped into the room. He screamed once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled happily, to find that I had done so much. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a quiet sound. This, however, did not anger me; it would not be heard through the wall. At last it stopped. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the body. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no beating. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the

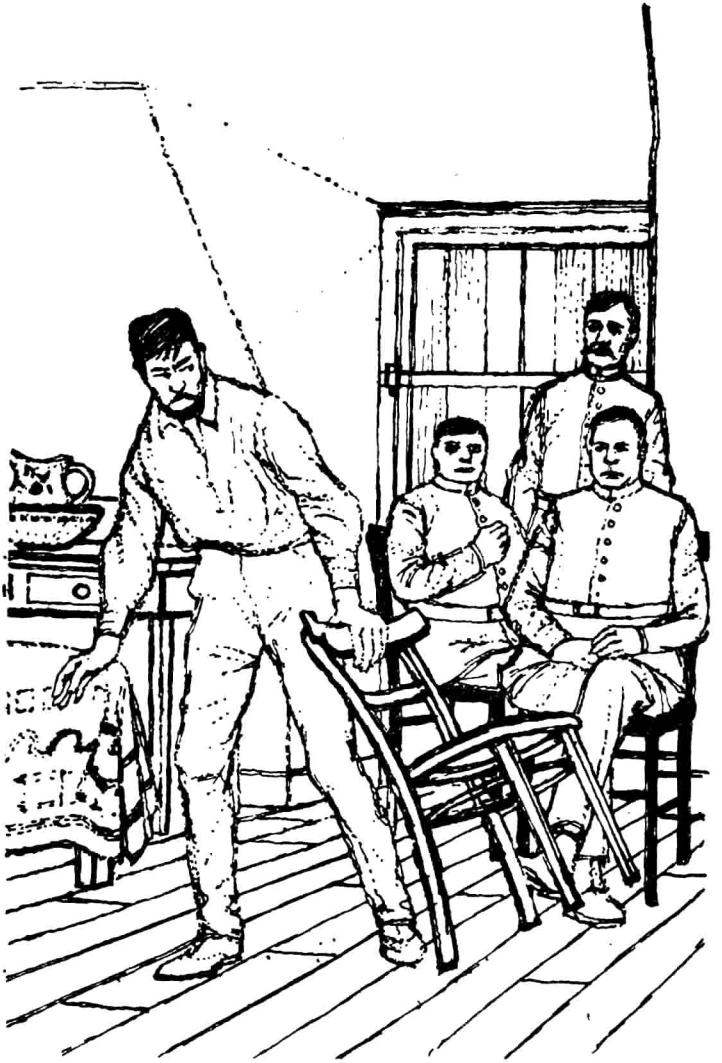
body. The night was passing, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three pieces of wood from the flooring of the room, and put all in the hole. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye, not even *his*—could have found anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too careful for that.

When I had made an end of all this, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street-door. I went down to open it with a light heart—for what had I *now* to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves as officers of the police. A cry had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion had been aroused; information had been given at the police office, and the officers had been told to search the house.

I smiled—for *what* had I to fear? I welcomed the gentlemen. The cry, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I told them to search—to search well. Finally I led them to *his* room. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In my confidence I brought chairs into the room, and asked them to take a rest, while I, in perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which lay the body of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted familiar things. But, before long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I thought I had a ringing in my ears, but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct, I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling, but it continued even more—until I found that the noise was not within my ears.



I swung the chair on which I had been sitting and dragged it along the floor

No doubt I now grew very pale—but I talked more easily, and with a louder voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound—like the sound a watch makes when wrapped in cotton. I breathed heavily—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more loudly; but the noise steadily increased. I rose and argued violently about little things, but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I walked the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observation of the men —but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! What *could* I do? I shouted—I raged—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and dragged it along the floor, but the noise rose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder —*louder!* And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no. They heard! —they suspected!—they *knew*! They were tricking me! This I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this fear! Anything! I could bear those smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again—listen! louder! louder! louder! *louder!*

'Villains!' I screamed, 'trick me no more! I admit the crime! tear up the wood!—here, here!—it is the beating of his horrible heart.'

William Somerset Maugham (1874-1962) intended to be a doctor before he changed to literature and became one of the most respected of modern English writers. He was a successful dramatist, novelist and short-story writer, though it is as the last of these that he achieved most fame. It is difficult to choose among his many books but his novels *The Moon and Sixpence, Cakes and Ale,* and *The Razor's Edge* are certainly outstanding. Maugham travelled widely in the Far East and many of his short stories are set in that region. He also wrote an interesting book on his life as a writer called *The Summing Up.*

The Escape

Somerset Maugham

I HAVE always been convinced that if a woman once made up her mind to marry a man nothing but instant flight could save him. Not always that; for once a friend of mine, seeing the unavoidable in front of him, took ship from a certain port (with a toothbrush for all his luggage, so conscious was he of his danger and the necessity for immediate action) and spent a year travelling round the world; but when, thinking himself safe (women are changeable, he said, and in twelve months she will have forgotten all about me), he landed at the same port the first person he saw gaily waving to him from the quay was the little lady from whom he had fled. I have only once known a man who in such circumstances managed to free himself. His name was Roger Charing. He was no longer young when he fell in love with Ruth Barlow and he had sufficient experience to make him careful; but Ruth Barlow had a gift (or should I call it a quality?) that makes most men defenceless, and it was this that took away Roger's common sense, his carefulness and his worldly wisdom. This was the gift of pathos. Mrs Barlow, for she was twice a widow, had splendid dark eyes and they were the most moving I ever saw; they seemed to be always on the point of filling with tears; they suggested that the world was too much for her, and you felt that, poor dear, her sufferings had been more than anyone should be asked to bear. If, like Roger Charing, you were a strong fellow with plenty of money, it was almost certain that you should say to yourself: I must stand

between the dangers of life and this helpless little thing, oh, how wonderful it would be to take the sadness out of those big and lovely eyes! I gathered from Roger that everyone had treated Mrs Barlow very badly. She was apparently one of those unfortunate persons with whom nothing by any chance goes right. If she married a husband he beat her, if she employed a broker he cheated her, if she engaged a cook, the cook drank. She never had a little lamb but it was sure to die.

When Roger told me that he had at last persuaded her to marry him, I wished him joy.

'I hope you'll be good friends,' he said. 'She's a little afraid of you, you know; she thinks you're unfeeling.'

'Upon my word I don't know why she should think that.'

'You do like her, don't you?'

'Very much.'

'She's had a rotten time, poor dear. I feel so dreadfully sorry for her.'

'Yes,' I said.

I couldn't say less. I knew she was stupid and I thought she was scheming. My own belief was that she was as hard as nails.

The first time I met her we had played cards together and when she was my partner she twice played very badly. I behaved like an angel, but I confess that I thought if the tears were going to come into anybody's eyes they should have been mine rather than hers. And when, having by the end of the evening lost a good deal of money to me, she said she would send me a cheque and never did, I could only think that I and not she should have worn a pathetic expression when next we met.

Roger introduced her to his friends. He gave her lovely jewels. He took her here, there, and everywhere. Their marriage was announced for the immediate future. Roger was very happy. He was committing a good action and at the same time doing something he very much wanted to. It is an uncommon situation