

Tales of Mystery and Imagination
神秘与想象故事

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Edgar Allan Poe

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THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

Cruel judges

I felt a terrible pain. It made me feel so sick that I nearly died. When they untied me at last, and I was allowed to sit up, I felt that my senses would leave me and that I would faint. I heard the judge say the word 'death'. That was the last thing I was sure I heard. 5

After that, the sound of the questioning voices seemed mixed and unclear, like a dim noise from far away. Yet, for a while, I saw the lips of the judges speaking to me. They appeared to me to be white, whiter than the piece of paper upon which I write these words, and cruelly thin. 10 Then, when I saw all the horror surrounding me, I began to think how peaceful it must be in a grave. But while I was trying to think about this quiet end, rather than all the horrors and pain I must go through first, everything went silent and still, and all was black. I had fainted. 15

Very suddenly, I realized that I could hear the sound of my heart beating. Then, even more suddenly, all that had happened to me passed through my mind. I was so terrified by what I remembered that I did not want to recover from my faint. I could remember every detail of the trial, the faces of the judges, that I was to die by order of the court, and that at the end I had fainted. But I did not know how long ago all that had been. 20

So far, I had not opened my eyes. I could feel that I was lying on my back, and that I was not tied. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. I let it lie there for many minutes while I tried to imagine where I could be. I wanted to use my sight, but did not dare. I was so afraid of what I might find 25 30

around me. I especially feared that there might, indeed, be nothing to see. At last, with a wild beat of my heart, I quickly opened my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were true. The blackness of everlasting night closed in around
5 me.

I felt that I could not breathe. I lay quietly and tried to control myself. I tried to make my brain work so that I could defeat my terror in that way. I knew that the court had ordered my death, and now that my mind was clearer,
10 I did not think that the trial had been very long ago. I knew definitely that I was not yet dead. I knew too, that people like me were usually burned to death. There had been a death by burning at the same time as my trial. Perhaps I had been put back in my prison cell to await a
15 similar end. Perhaps I would wait for many months. Then I realized that this was not probable. The people in the city demanded blood, and death.

Staring into the darkness

A fearful idea now suddenly sent the blood rushing to my
20 heart, and I fainted again. When I recovered, I at once jumped to my feet, trembling all over. I pushed out my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing, but I was terrified to move a step in case I went straight into a wall. I had the terrible thought in my mind
25 that they might have buried me alive underground. The sweat collected on my forehead in big drops.

I stopped waving my hands around and stood there at last, still as a stone. Then I moved carefully forward, with my arms stretched out in front of me. My eyes stared hard
30 into the darkness, hoping to see some faint ray of light. I went forward for a number of steps, but all was blackness, and I could feel nothing. I began to breathe more easily. It seemed that at least I had not been buried alive.

As I continued to step carefully forward, I remembered all the dreadful stories about the horrors that were to be found in this prison. People used to whisper in fear about what happened here. Perhaps I had been left to starve to death in this strange underground cell. Or perhaps something even more terrible was about to happen to me. Whatever it was that awaited me, I knew my judges well enough to feel sure that the result would be death. They never changed their decisions. I was only uncertain about how, and when, I would die.

Measuring my cell

At last my hands touched something. It was a stone wall, very smooth, damp and cold. I followed it around, walking carefully all the time. While I was doing this, however, I realized that I might pass the point where I had first touched the wall without knowing it. If that happened I would not know what kind of cell I was in, nor how big it was. I was especially confused because the wall seemed to be perfectly smooth, with no corners. I therefore looked for the knife that had been in my pocket, before my trial. It was gone, and I found to my surprise that my clothes had been replaced by a rough, dirty robe.

I had thought of forcing the knife into one of the gaps between the stones of the wall, to mark a place I would know I had passed before. My problem was easily solved, although at first, in my weakened state, I had thought it very difficult. I tore off a piece of cloth from the robe and placed it on the floor at the bottom of the wall. It would be in my path and I would certainly feel it as I completed my walk round the cell. At least, that is what I thought, but I had forgotten my own weakness, and I had no idea how big the cell in fact was.

The floor was damp and slippery. I walked on for some time, supporting myself against the wall. Then I

found I was too weak to take another step forward. I slipped and fell to the ground. I was so tired that I could not get up again, and soon I fell asleep on that damp, cold floor.

5 When I woke up, I stretched out my arm, and to my surprise I found beside me a loaf of bread and a cup of water. I was too tired and weak to wonder how these things had got there, but only ate and drank eagerly. Soon afterwards, I restarted the tour of my prison, and at last I
10 found the piece of cloth I had left lying against the wall.

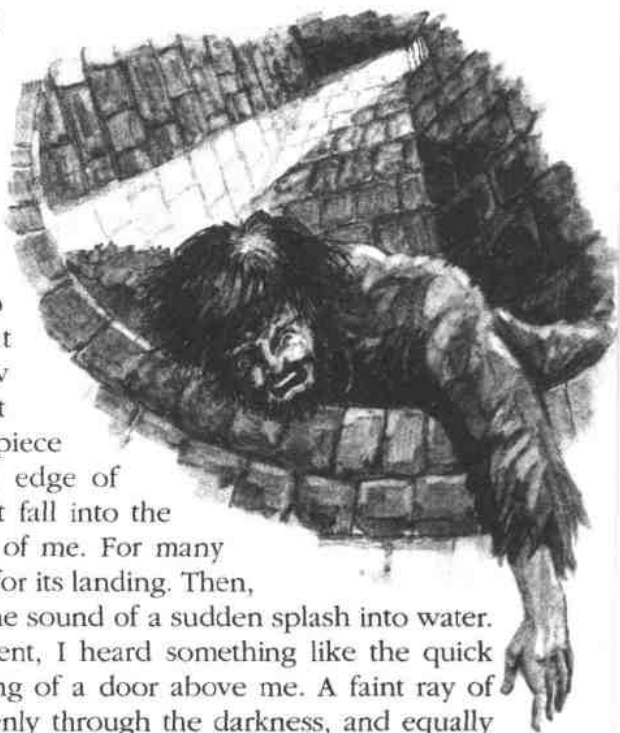
Up to the period when I fell, I had counted fifty-two steps. When I restarted, I counted forty-eight more before I got back to the cloth. There were altogether, then, one hundred steps. Taking two steps to be a yard, I thought
15 my cell must be about fifty yards all round. While I walked, though, I had found odd angles in the wall, and so I could not guess the shape of the cell.

I had no reason or plan for what I was doing — and certainly no hope — but curiosity made me continue.
20 Leaving the support of the wall, I decided that I would cross the centre of the cell to the other side. At first I went very carefully, for the floor, although it seemed solid, was very slippery. Finally, however, I became braver, and walked out firmly, trying to cross in as straight a line as
25 possible. I had advanced about ten or twelve steps in this way, when the end of my torn robe became caught between my legs. I stepped on it, and fell violently on my face.

The deep, dark pit

30 In the confusion caused by my fall, I did not immediately realize a very frightening thing, which, a few seconds later, and while I still lay face down on the floor, caught my attention. It was this — my chin rested on the floor of the prison, but my lips and the upper part of my head,
35 although they were bent lower than my chin, touched

nothing. I reached out my arm, and shook with terror when I realized that I had fallen on the very edge of a large circular hole in the floor. Of course, I had no way of telling at that moment how big, or how deep it was. I broke off a piece of stone from the edge of the hole, and let it fall into the blackness in front of me. For many seconds I listened for its landing. Then, at last, there was the sound of a sudden splash into water. At the same moment, I heard something like the quick opening and closing of a door above me. A faint ray of light flashed suddenly through the darkness, and equally suddenly faded away.



Then I realized the death that they had prepared for me. I smiled to myself with relief at the accident which had caused me to escape from such a death. Another step before my fall, and the world would never have seen me again. Shaking all over, I crawled back to the wall. I decided that it would be better to die there than to risk the terror of the pit. 25

Realizing the truth

30

I was so terrified and upset that I stayed awake for many long hours, but at last I slept. When I woke, I found by my side, as before, a loaf of bread and a cup of water. I was very thirsty, and drank all the water at once. There must have been something in it, for as soon as I put the 35

cup down, I fell asleep. It was a deep sleep, like the sleep of death. I do not know how long it lasted, but when I opened my eyes again, the objects around me could be seen. I could see how large the cell was and what it
5 looked like.

I had been greatly mistaken in its size. The length around its walls could not have been more than twenty-five yards. For some minutes this fact worried me more than anything else, though it may sound strange. For it
10 was so unimportant, when I knew that death, in some form, would soon come to me. Why should the size of my cell worry me? But it did trouble me, and I was determined to discover why I had made an error in my earlier measurements.

At last I realized the truth. In my first attempt to go round the cell, I had counted fifty-two steps, up to the period when I fell. I must then have been within a step or two of the piece of cloth. In fact, I had nearly gone round the whole cell. I then slept, and when I woke, I
20 must have gone back the way I had come, not forward. Therefore I had made myself think that the cell was nearly twice the size that it actually was. My confusion of mind must have prevented me from noticing that I had begun my tour with the wall on my left, and ended it with the
25 wall on my right.

I had not been right, also, about the shape of the cell. In feeling my way, I had found many angles, and thus thought that the cell was a very odd shape. It proves the effect of total darkness on a man who is both mentally
30 and physically tired. The angles, which seemed to form a major part in the shape of the cell, were simply a few uneven stones that appeared at odd places. The general shape of the cell was square. I now noticed the floor, too, which was of stone. In the centre was the circular pit that
35 I had so nearly fallen into.

I saw all this with difficulty. My physical position had been greatly changed while I had been sleeping. I now

lay upon my back, stretched out fully, on a low wooden board. I was tied to this board by a long, strong strap that went round and round my body, leaving free only my head and my left arm. With effort I could reach the food that lay in a dish by my side on the floor. I saw, to my horror, that the cup of water had been removed. I was terribly thirsty, but there was no water to make me feel better. 5

A clock with a pendulum

Looking upwards, I stared at the ceiling of my prison. It was about thirty or forty feet high. What especially caught my attention was a clock, supported on the great bars of wood that held up the ceiling, with a huge pendulum hanging from it. While I looked up at it (for it was directly above me), I thought that I could see the pendulum moving. I soon realized that I was right. It was moving slowly backwards and forwards. I watched it for some minutes, afraid but also curious. What could this mean? At last I became tired of the dull movement of the pendulum, and turned to look at the walls again. 10 15 20

A slight noise attracted my attention. I looked at the floor, and saw several enormous rats crossing it. They had come up from the pit, which lay just within view to my right. Even then, as I looked, many more rats came up over the edge. They came quickly, and had hungry eyes. They must have been attracted by the smell of the food beside me. It took all my energy and attention to keep them away from the food in the dish. 25

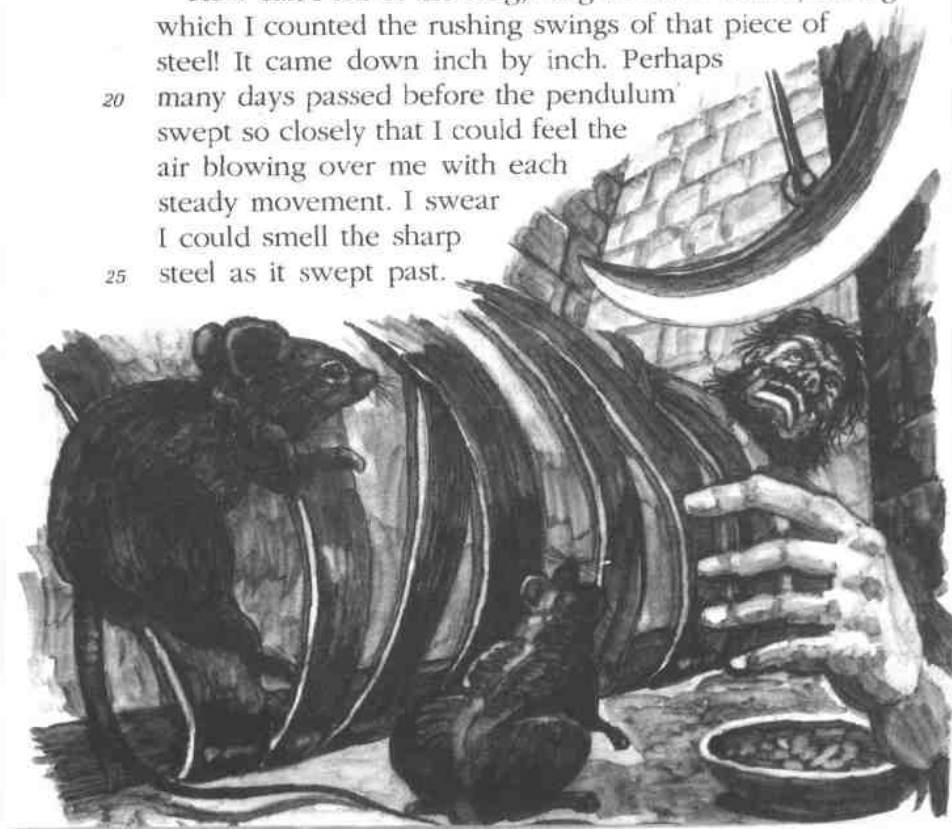
Long hours of horror

It could have been half an hour, perhaps even an hour, before I again looked up to the clock. What I saw then terrified and amazed me. The length of swing of the pendulum from side to side had increased by nearly a 30

yard, and the pendulum now moved back and forth much faster. But what disturbed me most was that I was certain it was lower than it had been. I now saw, with horror, that at the bottom of the pendulum there was a piece of steel in the shape of a quarter moon. It was about a foot in length from curved point to curved point. The points were facing upwards, and the bottom, outer edge was obviously as sharp as a butcher's knife. It looked heavy and dangerous, and was full of dreadful terror for me. The pendulum hissed wickedly as it swung through the air.

Now I knew the kind of death that my judges had arranged for me. They had given up the idea of the pit once I had discovered it. They realized that now I would not fall down into it without being pushed, and they did not intend to do that. So, they had decided on the pendulum for me instead!

How can I tell of the long, long hours of horror, during which I counted the rushing swings of that piece of steel! It came down inch by inch. Perhaps many days passed before the pendulum swept so closely that I could feel the air blowing over me with each steady movement. I swear I could smell the sharp steel as it swept past.



I prayed for a quick descent of the pendulum. I struggled like a madman, and tried to force myself upward against its knife-like blade. And then I fell suddenly calm, and lay smiling up at the pendulum that would kill me. I was waiting for it as eagerly as a child waits to be given a 5 toy.

Then I fainted again. It was only for a short time, I think, for when I recovered I could see little change in the descent of the pendulum. I felt sick and weak, but in spite of my pain and terror, I was hungry. With a painful 10 effort, I stretched out my left arm as far as I could, and ate some of the food that had not been taken by the rats.

The pendulum comes closer

The pendulum was swinging across my body at right angles to my length. I could see that the bottom edge of 15 the pendulum was set to cross the area of my heart. It would cut through the cloth of my robe. It would return and repeat its work, again and again. Yet in spite of its very wide swing (some thirty feet or more) and the hissing movement of its descent, the pendulum would take 20 several minutes to cut through my robe, because it was descending so slowly.

It crept steadily down. It moved to the right, to the left, far and wide. With a hiss like the devil himself, it moved down slowly towards my heart, as cruel as a tiger! Down 25 — always, always down! It came to within three inches of my chest! I struggled violently to free my left arm. This was free only from the elbow to the hand. With a great effort I could reach the food on my left and put it to my mouth, and that was all. If I had been able to loosen the 30 strap, which held my body above the elbow, I am sure I would have tried to seize the pendulum and stop its movement. It would have been easier to stop a mad bull!

It was still coming down! I struggled each time the pendulum crossed above my body. I shrank back each 35

time it swung. My eyes followed its outward and upward movements with the eagerness of complete despair. My eyes closed each time the terrible thing passed over me. Death would have been a welcome relief.

5

Faint hopes

I saw that it would not be much longer before the steel would start to cut my robe. When I realized this, I became calm. For the first time in many hours, or perhaps days, I began to think carefully. I thought about the strap that
10 tied me down. It was most unusual, being of one long piece only. The first cut by the pendulum on the strap would mean that I might be able to pull the whole thing away from my body, with my left hand. But how frightening would be the closeness of the cutting steel!
15 The slightest mistake would end in death. And it was likely, too, that the people who had thought of this means of death had also thought of this very problem! It seemed unlikely, therefore, that the strap crossed my chest in the path of the pendulum.

20 I lifted my head as far as I could, to try to look at my chest. I was terrified that I would find my last, faint hope destroyed. At last I could see. The strap was tied closely round my arms, legs and body in all directions — except where the destroying pendulum would cut me.

25 I had hardly dropped my head back to its original position when I had a new thought of hope. I started at once, with the nervous energy of despair, to try to make it work.

For many hours, hundreds of rats had been crawling
30 all around me. They were wild, bold, hungry. Their red eyes looked at me as if they were only waiting for my death so that they could attack me. 'What dreadful food,' I wondered to myself, 'have they been eating in that pit?'

Although I had tried to stop them, they had eaten nearly
35 everything in the dish. I waved my hand above it

occasionally to chase them away, but at last the regular movement of my hand had made that useless. The rats no longer feared me, and frequently bit my fingers. Now, however, I wanted them to eat. I made my fingers sticky with what was left of the food, and then rubbed them on the strap, everywhere I could touch it. Soon the strap began to smell of food. Then I lay as still as possible.

The strap is loosened

At first, the hungry rats were frightened because the regular movement of my hand had stopped. They stayed away, and many went back into the pit. But this was only for a moment. Seeing that I remained without movement, one or two of the bravest leapt onto the piece of wood that I lay on, and smelt at the strap. This seemed to be a signal for a general rush. They leapt in hundreds onto my body. The regular movement of the pendulum did not seem to disturb them at all. Avoiding its swings, they were busy chewing at the strap. They crawled all over me, over my neck and face. Their noses and feet touched my mouth. I could hardly breathe because of them. Feelings for which the world has no name rose inside me, and my heart grew cold with horror. But I felt that the struggle would be over in a minute. I could clearly feel the strap loosening. I knew that it must already be broken in more than one place.

At last I was free. The strap hung from my body, chewed through in many places by the hungry rats. But the pendulum had already swung across my chest. It had split the cloth of my robe. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain went through every part of my body. But the moment of escape had arrived. At a wave of my hand, the rats, which had helped me, hurried away. Moving steadily and slowly sideways, I slid off the wooden board beyond the reach of the deadly pendulum. For the moment, at least, I was free.