

EDGAR A. POE

The Tell-Tale Heart¹ Heart

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 acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken!² and observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

¹⁰ It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, 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! He had the eye of a vulture³ – a pale blue eye, with a film⁴ over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

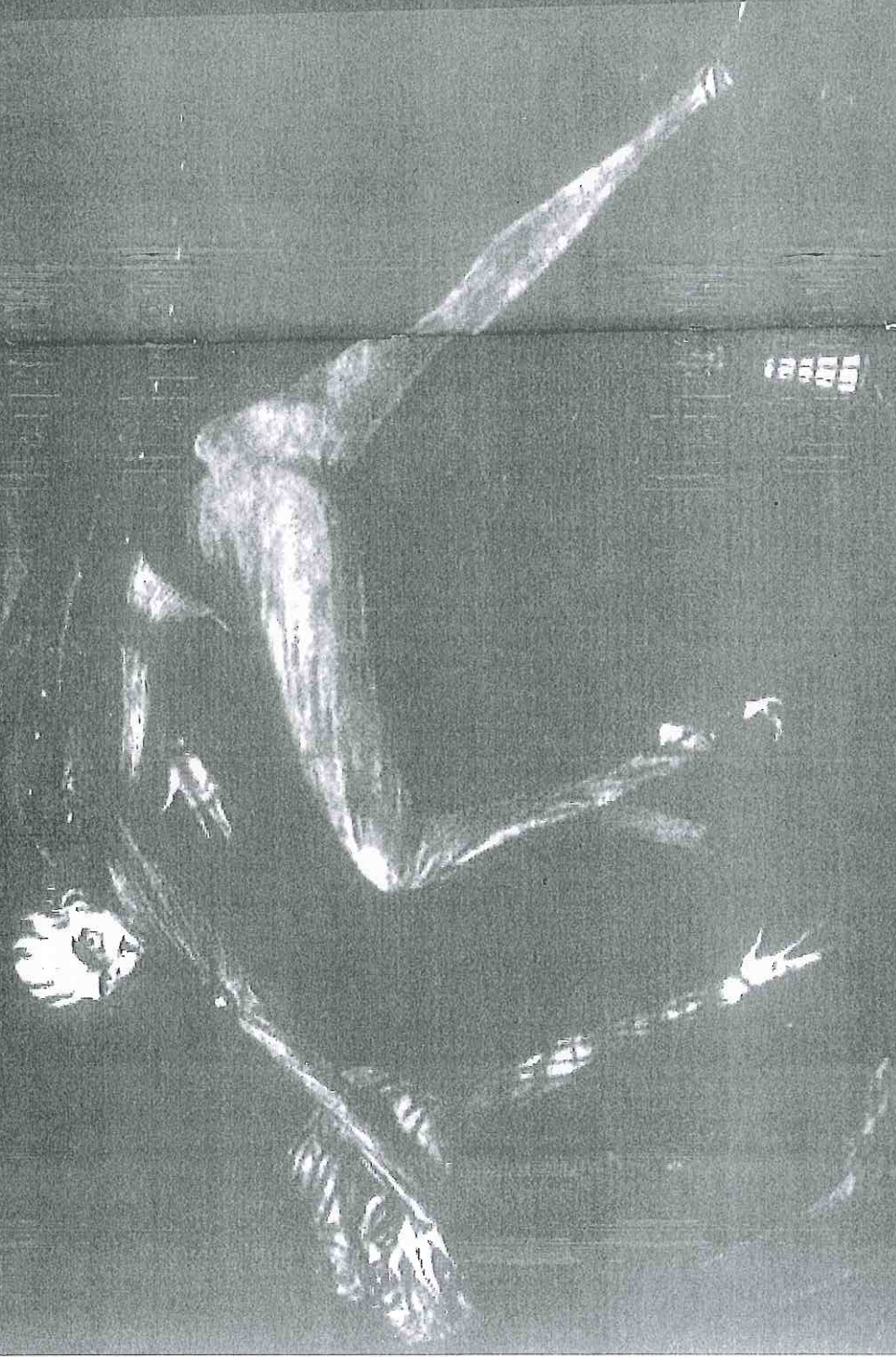
Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have

1. Tell-tale, which reveals some information.

2. Hearken!: listen!

3. A vulture: un vautour.

4. Film: veil.



seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution
 25 – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never
 kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And
 every night, about 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 lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out,
 30 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. Hai
 – would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head
 35 was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously – oh, so cautiously –
 cautiously (for the hinges⁵ creaked) – I undid it just so much that a single
 thin ray 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 vexed⁶ me, but
 40 his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the
 chamber, 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 profound 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 moves more quickly than did mine. Never
 before that night, had I felt the extent of my own powers – of my sagacity.
 I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was,
 45 opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret
 deeds of thoughts. I fairly chuckled⁷ 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 pitch with the thick darkness,
 (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I
 knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it
 55 on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my
 thumb slipped upon the tin⁸ fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed,
 crying out – 'Who's there?'

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move
 60 a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still

5. The hinges: *les gonds*.
 6. Vexed: annoyed.

7. Chuckled: laughed quietly.
 8. Tin: *étain*.

sitting up in the bed listening; – just as I have done, night after night, heart-
 ening to the death watches⁹ in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mor-
 tal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief – oh, no! – it was the low
 65 stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with
 awe.¹⁰ I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the
 world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dread-
 ful echo, the terrors that distracted¹¹ 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
 70 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 upon 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 a cricket¹² which has made a single chirp.' Yes, he had
 75 been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all
 in vain. *All in vain*; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his
 black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mourn-
 ful influence of the unperceived 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 resolved to open a little – a very, very little crevice¹³ in the
 lantern. So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily¹⁴ –
 until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out
 the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open – wide, wide open – and I grew furious as I gazed upon
 85 it. I saw it with perfect distinctness – all a dull blue, with a hideous yell over
 it that chilled¹⁵ the very marrow¹⁶ in my bones; but I could see nothing else
 of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct,
 precisely upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but
 90 over acuteness of the senses? – now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull,
 quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped 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 stimulates the soldier into courage.

9. Death watches: death-watch beetles, small
 insects which make a sound like a watch ticking
 (and are believed to announce death).
 10. Awe: a mixture of terror and wonder.
 11. Distracted: bewildered me, made me mad.

12. Cricket: *grillon*.
 13. Crevice: crack, opening.
 14. Stealthily: quietly, furtively.
 15. Chilled: cooled, frightened.
 16. Marrow: *moelle*.

95 But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo¹⁷ 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 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 refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me

105 — the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once — once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

115 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 waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

120 I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings.¹⁸ I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye — not even *his* — could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out — no stain of any kind — no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub¹⁹ had caught all — hal hal!

125 When I had made an end of these labours, 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, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play²⁰ had been aroused; informa-

17. Tattoo: the beating of a drum.

18. Scantlings: *lattes de bois du parquet*.

19. A tub: a container for a liquid.

20. Foul play: murder.

tion had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.²¹

I smiled, — for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, 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 bade them search — search *well*. I led them, at length, to *his* chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them *here* to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed

140 my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My *manner* had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long,²² I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: — it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness — until, at length, I found that the noise was *not* within my ears.

150 No doubt I now grew very pale; — but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened²³ voice. Yet the sound increased — and what could I do? It was a *low, dull, quick sound* — *much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for breath — and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly — more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles,²⁴ in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men — but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed²⁵ — I raved²⁶ — I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards²⁷ but the noise arose 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 making a mockery of my horror! — this I thought, and this I think. But

165 anything was better than this agony!²⁸ Anything was more tolerable than

21. Premises: place.

22. Ere long: before long.

23. Heightened: louder.

24. Trifles: unimportant things.

25. Foam: *écumer*.

26. Raved: talked in an excited, uncontrolled way.

27. Grated it upon the boards: pulled it against the boards so as to make a lot of noise.

28. Agony: terrible pain.

this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now – again! – hark! louder! louder! louder! louder! louder!

'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble²⁹ no more! I admit the deed! – tear¹⁷⁰ up the planks! here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!'

²⁹ Dissemble: hide the truth.

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849) was born in Boston and educated in Richmond and in England after the early death of his parents. He studied at the University of Virginia, enlisted in the army, but got himself dismissed to start a career as a writer. He held several jobs as an editor of magazines and wrote poems and short stories between fits of mental depression and drinking bouts. He is considered as the inventor of the modern detective story and is best known for his Gothic horror stories. They often portray oversensitive characters in the grip of terror when faced with such supernatural events as vampirism, spectres, entombments and reincarnations.

Short Stories:

Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840)

Poems:

The Raven and Other Poems (1845)