

The Pit and the Pendulum

By Edgar Allan Poe

I almost fear to tell the world of what they did to me. But tell I must, if only to warn others. You must hear of the Inquisition, of the trial, and of the torture -- these monstrosities that nearly destroyed me. Now I shall tell you the story, but though I may perhaps tell you *how* it happened, I shall never be able to tell you *why*.

The Spanish Inquisition was the murderous mission of death by which the church of that ancient land violently demanded that all people accept its hateful teachings. Their god was a god of violence, of revenge, of death and hell-punishment. Their monstrous inquisition began in 1666, just as men began to demand freedom from hateful religions; and it did not end until Napoleon's great general, Francoise Lasalle, marched into that nation, freeing the people from the murderous priests who ruled over them. That was the Inquisition. It took me, tormented me, and tried to exterminate me in the name of God.

I was a merely a guest in Spain -- a Frenchman with no understanding of the danger for all who refused to accept the terrifying teachings of the high church. I did not attempt to flee until it was too late. In 1806, the all-powerful church in Toledo resumed its hateful inquisition of four centuries

past, and undertook public ceremonies of torture and death for all who did not share the superstitions of the priests, the monks, and the church-men who ruled that terrified land. These were the men who killed in the name of God. I was a defenseless foreigner, caught up in these hateful ceremonies of destruction. They took me, they accused me, and they tried me -- all on the charge that I did not worship God as they did. And for that I was to die.

The Trial

I was tied and gagged as I sat and waited for the judges. And I was sick, sick unto death with that long agony that comes with the fear of death. When they finally untied me, and I was permitted to sit before the judges of the court, I felt that I was losing my mind. The sentence, the dread "sentence of death": these were the last distinct words which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the voices seemed merged in a nightmare's hum. But I saw the thin, pale lips of the black-robed judges, and those lips spoke of torture. Those awful lips -- I saw them twist with those deadly words. I heard them speak my name, and I shuddered. And then there slipped into my imagination, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. Then there was silence and stillness and night.

I had lost consciousness -- but not completely. Even in the deepest sleep, all is not lost. There *are* dark dreams. My dark dreams told of tall, robed figures that lifted me and carried me in silence down, down, still down. There was a vague horror. Then came a sense of motionlessness, as if those who carried me had reached the lowest limits of the world and would deposit

me in death's own chamber. After that, I call to mind flatness and dampness; and then all is MADNESS -- the madness of life in Hell.

Then I heard the sound of my heart, and then a memory -- a memory of the trial, of the judges, of the sentence, and of the sickness I felt when I knew I would be tortured to death.

The Dungeon

So far I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. There I let it remain for many minutes, while I tried to imagine where I could be. Yet I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not so much that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew afraid that there might be NOTHING to see. Finally, I opened my eyes. My worst thoughts were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. The darkness seemed to smother me. What now?

I lay quietly, and made effort to use my reason. It appeared to me that a long time had passed. I did not suppose myself actually dead; but where was I -- and in what condition?

A fearful idea now suddenly drove in upon my heart. Had they buried me alive? I had to know! I stood up and thrust my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing; but I dreaded to move a step for fear that I should be stopped by the walls of a TOMB. The sweat stood in cold beads upon my forehead. The agony grew intolerable, and I cautiously

moved forward, with my arms extended and my eyes straining in the hope of catching some faint ray of light. I proceeded for many steps, and though all was blackness and emptiness, I concluded that I had not been sealed within a grave. I breathed more freely. It seemed evident that mine was not, at least, this most horrible of fates.

And now, as I still continued to step cautiously onward, there came to my memory a thousand vague rumors of the horrors of Toledo. Of the dungeons strange things had been said -- too horrible to repeat except in a whisper. Was I left to die of starvation in this underground world of darkness? Or what fate perhaps even more fearful awaited me? The result would be death, and a death of horror -- I knew *that*. The manner of death and the hour of death -- these questions were all that occupied me.

I reached. I wandered. I stumbled. Finally, my outstretched hands encountered something solid. It was a wall, seemingly of stone masonry -- very smooth, slimy, and cold. I followed along the wall, stepping with careful distrust. This process, however, gave me no way to learn the size and shape of my dungeon. After all, the walls were slightly curved, and so I might make a complete trip around the room, and return to the point from which I had set out, without being aware of the how far I had gone. What to do? I reached for my knife, but it was gone. I had had some thought of forcing the blade into some crevice of the wall so as to identify my starting point. Without a knife, I needed another way; so I tore some material from my prison clothes, and placed the fragment at full length, and at a right angle to the wall. In groping my way around the prison, I could not fail to encounter this rag upon

completing the circuit -- as long as I was careful.

So, at least, I thought. But I had not counted upon the size of the dungeon, or upon my own weakness. The going was difficult and tiring. The ground was moist and slippery. I staggered onward for some time, and then I stumbled and fell. My fatigue forced me to rest, and sleep soon overtook me as I lay on the floor of the dungeon.

Upon awaking, and stretching forth an arm, I found beside me a loaf of stale bread and a pitcher of muddy water. I was too exhausted to reflect upon this. I ate and drank. Shortly afterwards, I resumed my trip around the prison, and with much toil came at last upon the fragment of the cloth I had left as a marker. Up to the moment when I fell, I had counted fifty-two steps; and, upon resuming my walk, I had counted forty-eight more when I arrived at the rag. There were in all, then, a hundred paces; and, estimating two paces to the yard, I estimated the dungeon to be fifty yards around. I had met, however, with many angles in the wall, and so I could form no guess at the shape of the vault.

I had no good reason to go through these explorations, but a vague curiosity led me to continue them. I *had* to know. Leaving the wall, I decided to cross the area of the enclosure. At first, I proceeded with extreme caution, for the floor was treacherously slippery with slime. At length, however, I took courage and stepped firmly -- trying to cross in as direct a line as possible. I had advanced some ten or twelve paces in this manner when the torn rags of my prison clothes became entangled between my legs. I stepped on them,

tripped, and fell violently on my face. The fall was painful, but I remained a living human being -- for the moment at least.

The Pit

In the confusion of my fall, I did not immediately grasp a somewhat startling fact: my chin rested upon the floor of the prison, but my lips and the upper portion of my head touched nothing. At the same time, my forehead seemed bathed in a vapor, and the peculiar smell of decayed fungus arose to my nostrils. I put forward my arm, and shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit. Groping about the stone just below the edge, I succeeded in breaking off a small fragment, and I let it fall into the hole. For many seconds I listened to its sounds as it clicked and clacked against the sides of the pit in its descent. After what seemed a long time, there was a splash into water, followed by loud echoes. At the same moment, there came a sound resembling the quick opening, and as rapid closing, of a door overhead, while a faint gleam of light flashed suddenly through the gloom, and as suddenly faded away. What were they doing? What was their terrible plan?

It took only a moment's thought to see clearly the doom which had been prepared for me. A fall to instant death or -- worse -- horrors at the bottom of the pit! Only by a lucky accident had I escaped. If I had taken another step

before tripping, the world would have seen me no more. The death just avoided was of that very character which I had heard about the Inquisition. There was the choice of death with physical agonies, or death with mental horrors. I had been reserved for the second kind of death. Their plan was working.

Shaking in every limb, I groped my way back to the wall -- resolving there to die rather than risk the terrors of the pit. In other conditions of mind I might have had courage to end my misery at once by a plunge into the abyss, but now I was the most complete of cowards. And I could not forget what I had read and heard about these pits -- that the SUDDEN destruction of life formed no part of their most horrible plan. What snakes, what insects, what diseased waters might wait at the bottom of the pit? I could not know. I could only imagine.

Fear kept me awake for many long hours, but with time I again slept. Upon awakening, I found by my side, as before, a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water. A burning thirst consumed me, and I emptied the vessel at a gulp. It must have been drugged, for scarcely had I drunk before I became irresistibly drowsy. A deep sleep fell upon me -- a sleep like that of death.

How long the slumber lasted I know not, but when once again I opened my eyes, the dungeon was visible. By some strange artificial light, the origin of which I could not at first determine, I was able to see the walls of the prison.

In its size I had been greatly mistaken. The whole circuit of its walls did not

exceed twenty-five yards. For some minutes, this fact caused me a world of mental trouble -- stupid indeed -- for what could be of less importance, under the terrible circumstances than the mere size of my dungeon? But my soul took a wild interest in little things, and I busied my mind in efforts to account for the error I had committed in my measurement. Then the truth flashed upon me. In my first attempt at exploration, I had counted fifty-two paces up to the moment when I fell. I must then have been within a step or two of the fragment of cloth I had left on the floor as a marker. I then slept. Upon awaking, I must have returned *backward along my original path*, thus supposing the distance around the dungeon to be nearly double what it actually was. My confusion of mind had prevented me from observing that I began my exploration with the wall to the left, and ended it with the wall to the right.

And I wasn't mistaken only about the size of the dungeon.

I had been deceived too in respect to the shape of the enclosure. In feeling my way, I had found many angles, and thus calculated an idea of great irregularity. That is the effect of total darkness upon the imagination. The angles were simply those of a few slight depressions or niches at several intervals. The general shape of the prison was rectangular, but without sharp angles.

The walls of the cell were likewise different from my imaginings. What I had taken for stone seemed now to be iron, or some other metal, in huge plates. The entire surface of these metallic walls was crudely painted with all the

hideous pictures to which the horrible monks were attracted. The figures of devils and fiends with skeleton-like forms overspread the walls. I observed that the outlines of these monstrosities were distinct, but the colors seemed faded and blurred.

I now noticed the floor, too, which was of stone. In the center yawned the circular pit from whose mouth I had escaped. And I was alone in this den of hell.

The Pendulum

All this I saw indistinctly and by much effort, for my personal condition had been greatly changed during slumber. I now lay upon my back, and at full length, on some kind of low framework of wood. To this I was securely bound by a long strap of leather. It passed in many twists and turns around my limbs and body, leaving free only my head, and my left arm to such extent that I could, with much effort, supply myself with food from a pottery dish which lay by my side on the floor. I saw to my horror that the pitcher of water had been removed. I say to my horror, for I was consumed with intolerable thirst. My torturers must have wanted to stimulate this thirst, for the food in the dish was strongly seasoned meat. But why?

Looking upward, I surveyed the ceiling of my prison. It was some thirty or forty feet overhead, and constructed much as the side walls. In one of its panels a unique figure took my whole attention. It was the painted figure of

Father Time as he is commonly represented, except that in place of a scythe he held what I supposed to be a huge pendulum, such as we see on old-fashioned clocks. There was something, however, in the appearance of this image which caused me to look at it more carefully. While I gazed directly upward at it, I imagined that I saw it in motion. In an instant afterward the thought was confirmed. It was a true machine! It moved. Its back and forth sweep was brief and slow, but it definitely moved. I watched it for some minutes, somewhat in fear but more in wonder. When I became weary with observing its dull movement, I turned my eyes upon the other objects in the cell.

A slight noise attracted my notice, and looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats running across the cell. They had come up from the pit which lay just within view to my right. While I gazed, they came up in troops, hurriedly and with hungry eyes, lured by the scent of the meat. It required much effort to scare them away from my one source of food.

It might have been half-an-hour before I again cast my eyes upward. What I then saw amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence, its speed was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had **DESCENDED**. I now observed with horror that it was formed of a blade of glittering steel, about a foot in length from tip to tip. And the lower edge was as sharp as a razor. It seemed massive and heavy, tapering from the edge into a solid and broad structure above. It was attached to a weighty rod of brass, and the whole thing **HISSED** as it swung through the air.

I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by the monks. I had avoided a plunge into the pit by the merest of accidents. Having failed to kill me this way, the monks abandoned their demon plan to hurl me into the pit, and had come up with another hellish way to destroy me. Not the pit, but the pendulum!

What good would it do to tell of the long, long hours of horror during which I counted the rushing swings of the steel pendulum! Inch by inch -- down and still down it came! Days seemed to pass until it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its steely breath. The odor of the sharp steel forced itself into my nostrils. I prayed. I wearied heaven with my prayer: "Let it kill me quickly!" I grew frantically mad, and I struggled to force myself upward against the sweep of the fearful blade -- anything to end this agony!

My body ached. And even amid the agonies of that period, my body craved food. With a painful effort, I outstretched my left arm as far as my bonds allowed and took a small remnant of the food that had been spared me by the rats. As I put a bit of it within my lips, there rushed to my mind a half-formed thought of joy -- of hope. Then my thoughts began to form an idea. Could I use my free arm in some way to stop the pendulum?

But at once my idea was clouded by wilder thoughts -- thoughts of blood. The swing of the pendulum was at right angles to my length. I saw that the razor-sharp crescent of steel was designed to cross the region of the heart. Notwithstanding its terrifically wide sweep (some thirty feet or more) and the

hissing power of its descent, the pendulum came down very slowly. When it first touched me, it would not kill me. First, it would accomplish little more than cutting my clothes; then it would scratch my skin; then it would cut my flesh; then it would dig deeper and deeper, killing me in a slow agony of blood.

And at this thought I paused. I dared not go farther than this reflection. But the thought kept coming. I found myself thinking about the sound of the steel blade as it would scratch across my shirt -- upon the peculiar scraping sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves. And when the blade cut through the cloth? The skin! The flesh! The bone! The fountain of blood! I pondered upon all this horror until my teeth were on edge.

Down -- steadily down it crept. I took a sick pleasure in contrasting its downward with its side-way motion. To the right it swung, and to the left -- far and wide -- with the shriek of a damned spirit! It was coming to my blood filled heart with its mindless progress! I alternately laughed and screamed.

Down -- certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my chest! Think! I struggled violently -- furiously -- to free my left arm. This arm was free only from the elbow to the hand. I could reach from the food-platter beside me to my mouth with great effort, but no farther. I thought. If I could break the straps above the elbow, I could seize and perhaps stop the pendulum. Wild hope!

Down -- still unceasingly -- still inevitably down! I gasped and struggled at

each sweep of the blade. My eyes followed its outward or upward whirls with the eagerness of despair, and then they closed at the descent. Death would have been a relief! Oh, how unspeakable! Still I quivered in every nerve to think how slight a sinking of the machinery would bring that sharp glistening axe upon my body. But why will a dead man fight what will certainly kill him? Hope! It was hope that prompted the mind to move. It is hope and hope alone that whispers to the death-condemned, even in the dungeons of the Inquisition.

Mine was a most desperate hope, a hope born of a wild idea. I saw that some ten or twelve sweeps would bring the steel in actual contact with my body, and with this observation there suddenly came over my spirit all the sharp, collected calmness of despair. For the first time during many hours, or perhaps days, I THOUGHT CLEARLY. It now occurred to me that the leather strap which bound me was the only thing holding me down. There were no extra or separate ropes tying me. The first stroke of the razor-like blade across any portion of the leather strap might so cut it that it could be unwound from my body by means of my left hand. But how fearful, in that case, the closeness of the steel! The result of the slightest struggle, how deadly! Was it likely, moreover, that the torturers had not foreseen and provided for this possibility! Was it possible that the strap crossed my chest in the track of the pendulum?

Dreading to find my last hope frustrated, I elevated my head to obtain a clear view of my chest. The leather binding covered my limbs and body in all directions EXCEPT IN THE PATH OF THE BLADE OF STEEL. The

pendulum would kill me before it cut the cords that tied me down. What now?

Scarcely had I dropped my head back into its original position when there flashed upon my mind the fully formed idea that had begun to come back when I had raised food to my lips with my one free arm. The whole thought was now present. I proceeded at once, with the nervous energy of despair, to attempt its execution.

For many hours, the immediate area of the low framework upon which I lay had been literally swarming with rats. They were wild, bold, and hungry, their red eyes glaring upon me as if they waited for motionlessness on my part to make me their prey. "To what food," I thought, "have they been accustomed in the pit?"

In spite of all my efforts to prevent them, they had eaten all but a small bit of the contents of the dish. To keep my food, I had fallen into an habitual see-saw or waving of the hand about the platter to brush them away; but it no longer worked to keep them at a distance from the food. In their violent eating, the creatures frequently fastened their sharp fangs in my fingers. All right! I would let the little monsters eat. With the particles of the oily and spicy food which now remained, I thoroughly rubbed the leather strap wherever I could reach it. Then, raising my hand from the floor, I lay breathlessly still.

At first the hungry animals were startled and terrified at the change -- at the

stillness of my hand. They moved back, alarmed at the change; many ran back into the pit. But only for a moment. Their bottomless hunger brought them back. Observing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest rats leaped upon the frame-work and smelled at the food-covered strap holding me down. This seemed the signal for a general rush. Forth from the pit they hurried in fresh troops. They clung to the wood to which I was tied; they overran it, and leaped in hundreds upon my body. The steady downward movement of the pendulum disturbed them not at all. Avoiding its strokes, they busied themselves with the food-smeared leather strap. They pressed and swarmed and chewed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips touched mine; I was half smothered by their pressure; disgust for which the world has no name swelled in my stomach and chilled my heart. One minute and I felt that the struggle would be over. Plainly I perceived the loosening of the straps as they chewed at the food and at the leather which to them was but more food. I knew that in more than one place the strap must be already cut. With a more than human resolution, I lay still beneath the filthy teeth of a thousand hungry rats.

Nor was I wrong in my calculations; I had not endured those filthy rats in vain. They ate through the straps, and at a moment I was FREE. The straps hung in strips from my body. And not a moment too soon. The stroke of the pendulum already pressed upon my chest. It had cut through the cloth on my chest, and it had begun to strip away at the flesh beneath. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain shot through every nerve. But the moment of escape had arrived. At a wave of my hand my rat saviors hurried away. With a steady movement, cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and slow, I slid from

the embrace of the torn leather straps, and slipped beyond the reach of the steel blade of death. For the moment, at least I WAS FREE.

Walls of Fire

Free! And in the grasp of the Inquisition! Free! And under the eyes of murderers! They would have a fiendish plan, I knew. And they did.

I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed of horror upon the stone floor of the prison when the motion of the hellish machine ceased, and I saw it drawn up by some invisible force through the ceiling. This was a lesson which I took desperately to heart. My every motion was undoubtedly watched, and a new plan had been set in motion. I had escaped death in one form of agony to be delivered unto worse than death in some other.

With that thought, I rolled my eyes nervously around on the walls of iron that held me in. Something unusual had taken place in the dungeon -- some change which at first I could not at first appreciate distinctly. For many minutes of a dreamy and trembling reflection, I busied myself in useless guessing. During this period, I became aware for the first time of the origin of the artificial light which lighted the cell. It proceeded from a crack about half-an-inch wide extending entirely around the prison at the base of the walls. In fact, the walls were completely separated from the floor. I tried to look through the crack, but the light was blinding.

As I arose from the attempt, the mystery of the change in the dungeon chamber broke at once upon my understanding. I have told you that, although

the outlines of the figures upon the walls were sufficiently distinct, the colors seemed blurred and indefinite. These colors had now assumed a startling and most intense brilliance, a brilliance that made the pictures on the walls clearer than ever before. That clarity gave to the ghostlike and fiendish portraits an aspect that might have horrified firmer nerves than my own. Demon eyes glared upon me from a thousand directions where none had been visible before, and gleamed with the lurid luster of a fire. I could not force my imagination to regard these pictures as unreal.

UNREAL! -- Even while I breathed there came to my nostrils the breath of the vapor of heated iron! A suffocating odor filled the prison! A deeper glow settled each moment in the demon eyes on the walls. A brighter tint of red colored the pictured horrors of blood. I panted. I gasped for breath! The fire heated walls were too hot to endure, forcing me to move inwards, toward the pit!

There could be no doubt of the design of my tormentors -- oh most unrelenting! Oh, most demoniac of men! I shrank from the glowing metal to the center of the cell. Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that came in on me, the idea of the coolness of the pit came over my soul like medicine. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the red hot ceiling illumined its inmost recesses. It was dark, filthy and horrifying below, filled with squirming creatures ready to eat away at my body. Yet, for a wild moment, my spirit refused to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced its way into my soul and burned itself in upon my shuddering brain. Oh for a voice to speak! -- oh, horror! -- oh, any

horror but this! With a shriek I rushed from the edge of the pit and buried my face in my hands – crying insanely.

The heat rapidly increased, and once again I looked up, shuddering as if with a fit of sickness. There had been a second change in the cell -- and now the change was obviously in the FORM. The King of Terrors would waste no more time in killing me. The room had been rectangular. I saw that its iron angles were now changing. There was a low rumbling or moaning sound as walls moved. In an instant the cell had shifted its form from a rectangle to that of a diamond. And the walls were moving in on me!

Which death would it be! Death in the fire or death in the pit?

"Death," I said "any death but that of the pit!" Fool I was! Might I not have known that INTO THE PIT it was the object of the burning iron to urge me? Could I resist its glow? Could I withstand its pressure? And now, flatter and flatter grew the diamond shape of the walls, with a rapidity that left me no time for contemplation. Its center, and of course, its greatest width, came just over the black hole. I shrank back -- but the closing walls pressed me inward toward the dreaded pit. Soon there was no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the prison. I struggled no more, but the agony of my soul found expression in one loud, long, and final SCREAM of despair. I felt that I tottered upon the brink -- I closed my eyes as I readied myself for a fall into a horrifying death --

-- And then there was a confused hum of human voices! There was a loud

blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell into the pit. It was the arm of an officer of General Lasalle. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies, and I was finally free.

In the years that passed, I watched with relief as that terrible Inquisition was ended by civilized men. I hope someday that their madness will be forgotten by the innocent people of Spain. But I for one shall never forget.