

THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

by Edgar Allan Poe



I was sick unto death with long agony; I lay upon my back, unbound. I strove to imagine where and what I could be. I longed, yet dared not to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew **aghast** lest there should be nothing to see. At length, with a wild desperation, I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me. The atmosphere was intolerably close.

A fearful idea suddenly drove the blood in torrents upon my heart, and I started to my feet trembling convulsively. I thrust my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing, yet dreaded to move a step, lest I should be impeded by the walls of a tomb. The agony of suspense grew at length intolerable, and I cautiously moved forward with my arms extended and my eyes straining from their sockets. I proceeded for many

paces; still all was blackness and vacancy. I breathed more freely. It seemed that mine was not, at least, the most hideous of fates.

As I still continued onward, there came thronging upon my recollection a thousand vague rumors of the **Horrors of Toledo**. Of the dungeons of the **Inquisition** there had been strange things narrated - fables I had always deemed them, too ghastly to repeat, save in a whisper. Was I left to perish of starvation in this **subterranean** world of darkness; or what fate, perhaps even more fearful, awaited me?

My outstretched hands at length encountered a wall, seemingly of stone **masonry**, smooth, slimy, and cold. Quitting the wall, I resolved to cross the area of the enclosure. I proceeded with extreme caution, for the floor, although solid, was treacherous with slime. I had advanced some ten or twelve paces in this manner when I stepped on the torn hem of my robe and fell violently on my face.

My chin rested upon the floor of the prison, but the upper portion of my head touched nothing. My forehead seemed bathed in a clammy vapor, and the 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 **masonry** just below the margin, I dislodging a small fragment, and let it fall into the **abyss**.

And then

I saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me. Another step - and the world had seen me no more. I had read of these pits. The sudden extinction of life formed no part of their most horrible plan.

I found by my side a loaf and a pitcher of water. I emptied the vessel at a **draught**. It must have been drugged; for scarcely had I drunk before a deep sleep fell upon me.

When I unclosed my eyes, the objects around me were visible. By a **sulphurous luster**, the origin of which I could not determine, I was enabled to see the extent and aspect of the prison. What I had taken for masonry seemed to be huge metal plates. The entire surface of this metallic enclosure was **daubed** in hideous and repulsive devices - fiends in **aspects** of menace.

The floor was of stone. In the center yawned the circular pit from whose jaws I had escaped.

My personal condition had been greatly changed. I now lay upon my back on a low framework of wood, securely bound by a long strap. It passed in many convolutions about my limbs and body, leaving at liberty only my head and my left arm to such extent that I could supply myself with food from an **earthen** dish on the floor. I was consumed with an intolerable thirst which it appeared to be the design of my persecutors to stimulate - for the food in the dish was meat, **pungently seasoned**.



I surveyed the ceiling of my prison - some thirty or forty feet overhead, and constructed much as the walls. In one of its panels was the painted figure of TIME.



In lieu of a **scythe**, he held what I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks. While I gazed up at it, I fancied that I saw it in motion. Its sweep was brief and slow. I watched it for some minutes, in fear and in wonder.

Then a slight noise attracted my notice, and looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats had issued from the well, allured by the scent of the meat. It might have been an hour before I again cast my eyes upward. What I then saw confounded me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased by nearly a yard, and it had perceptively descended.



I now observed with horror that its **nether** extremity was a crescent of glittering steel about a foot in length, the under edge as keen as a razor. It was **appended** to a weighty rod of brass, and the whole *hissed* as it swung through the air.

I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by the **Inquisitorial** agents.



What **boots** it to tell of the long hours of horror during which I counted the rushing vibrations of the steel! It might have been that days

passed **ere** it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath. The pendulum was at right angles to my length, a crescent designed to cross the region of the heart. Down, steadily down it crept. To the right, to the left. Down - relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom! Down – unceasingly, inevitably down!



Ten or twelve vibrations would bring the steel in actual contact with my robe, and with this observation there suddenly came over my spirit all the keen, collected calmness of despair. There flashed upon my mind an idea: feeble, scarcely sane, but still entire: For many hours the immediate vicinity had been literally swarming with rats. They were wild, bold, ravenous. They had devoured all but a small remnant of the contents of the dish. With the particles of the oily and spiced **viand** which remained, I rubbed my rope bandage wherever I could. Then, I lay breathlessly still.



Observing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest rats leaped upon the framework and smelled at the strap. This signaled a general rush. Forth from the well they hurried, and they leaped in hundreds upon my person. They busied themselves with the **anointed** bandage. They

writhed upon my throat. Their cold lips sought my own lips. Disgust swelled my bosom and chilled my heart, yet plainly I perceived the loosening of the bandage. With a more than human resolution I lay still.



At length, the strap hung in ribbons from my body. But the pendulum already pressed upon my bosom. Twice again it swung, and a sharp pain shot through every nerve. But the moment of escape had arrived! Cautious, sidelong, shrinking, I slid beyond the reach of the scimitar.

I was free. Free!

And in the grasp of the Inquisition!

I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed of horror when the motion of the hellish machine ceased, and I beheld it drawn up by some invisible force through the ceiling.

My every motion was undoubtedly watched.

I observed that the figures upon the walls were now assuming a startling brilliancy. Demon eyes glared upon me from a thousand directions - gleamed with the lurid luster of fire.



There came to my nostrils the vapor of heated iron! I gasped for breath. I shrank from the glowing metal to the center of the cell. The idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like **balm**. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the **enkindled** roof illumed its inmost recesses.

O horror! O any horror but this! With shriek, I buried my face in my hands - weeping bitterly. When I looked up, shuddering, there had been a second change: the room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were now acute - two, obtuse. The difference increased. With a low rumbling, the apartment had shifted its form into that of a lozenge. I neither hoped nor desired it to stop.



"Death," I said, "Any death but that of the pit!" Fool! might I have not known that into the pit it was the object of the burning iron to urge me?

At length, for my seared and writhing body there was no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the prison. The agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and final **scream** of despair. I tottered upon the brink. I averted my eyes ...

.... Suddenly there was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a loud blast as of many trumpets! A harsh grating as the fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies.

The End