

THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

by Edgar Allan Poe

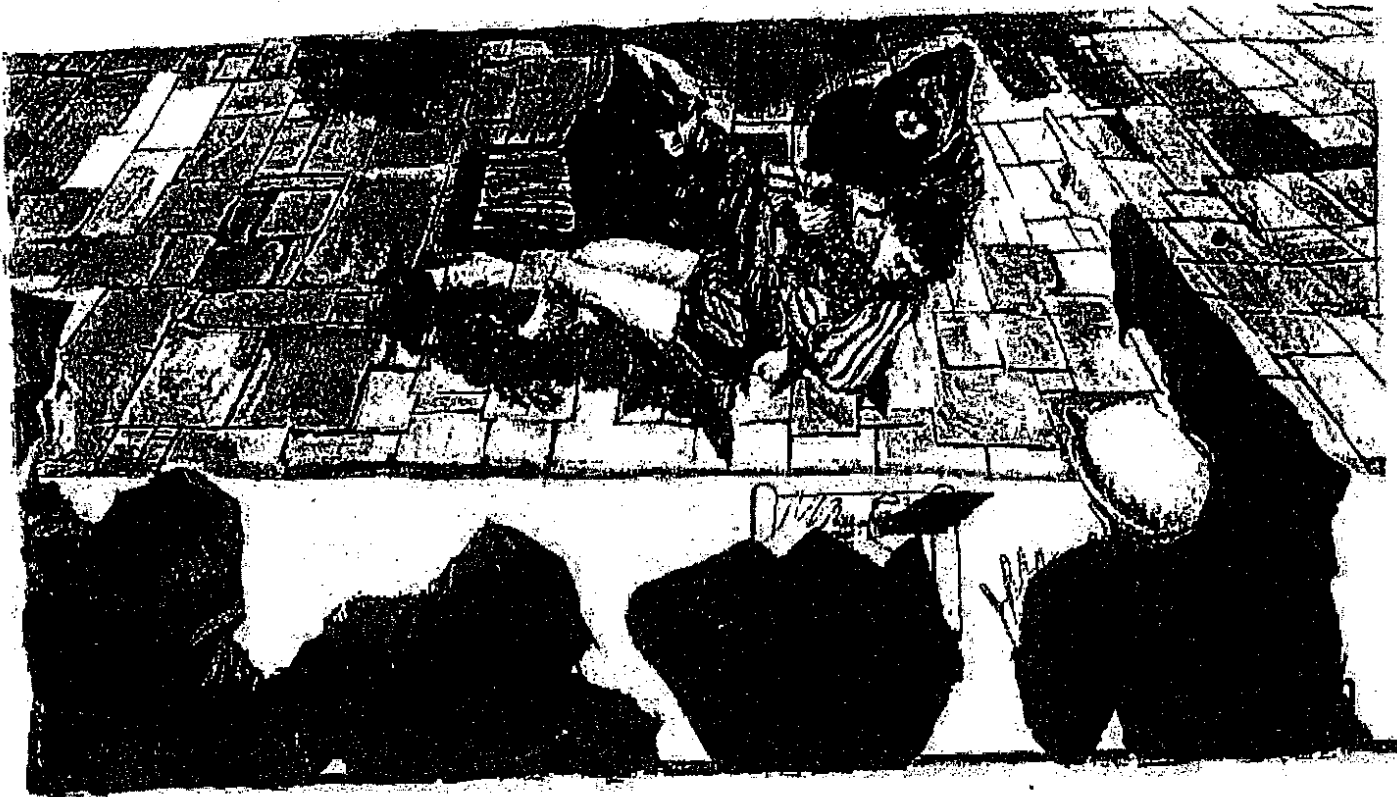
- ▶ Poe did not invent the horror story, but he did as much as any other author in history to develop it to perfection. His plots are tangles of terror that pile fear upon fear, and often corpse upon corpse. In "The Pit and the Pendulum," the tangle is more of a maze, a torture chamber in which a man is cruelly teased by hopes of survival. The narrator (person who tells the story) is a condemned prisoner during the Spanish Inquisition, a period when many persons were tried, convicted, and even killed for their religious beliefs.

I was sick—sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at last unbound me and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence—the dreadful sentence of death—was the last clear sound that reached my ears. After that, I heard no more. Yet, for a while, I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the paper upon which I now write—and thin, very thin. I saw that more words were still coming from those lips. I saw them pronounce the syllables of my name, and I shuddered because no sound came forth. And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles on the table. At first they seemed like white slender angels who would save me. But then, all at

once, the angel forms became meaningless specters, with heads of flame. I saw that from them there would be no help. Finally, the figures of the judges vanished, as if by magic, from before me. The tall candles sank into nothingness. The blackness settled over all. Silence, and stillness, and night were the universe.

I had swooned. But I will not say that all consciousness was lost. The shadows of my memory tell, indistinctly, of tall figures that lifted and carried me down—down—still down. Then came a sense of sudden stillness. Then all was *madness*—the madness of a memory that busied itself with forbidden thoughts. And in that memory were thoughts of the trial, of the

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- pendulum (PEN juh lum) swinging weight, as in an old-fashioned clock
 - specter (SPEK tur) ghost; phantom
 - swoon (SWOON) faint



judges, of the sentence, of the sickness, of the swoon.

I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back, unbound. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. I let my hand stay there for many minutes, while I tried to imagine where and *what* I could be. I wanted, yet dared not, to use my eyes. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. But at last, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly opened my eyes. The blackness of eternal night surrounded me. I struggled for breath. The very air around me grew thick. I still lay quietly, and made an effort to think clearly. I brought to mind the trial. From that point on, what had happened to me? The sentence had been given, and it seemed that a very long time had then passed. The sentence had de-

manded my death—yet not for a moment did I suppose myself actually dead. Those condemned to die, I knew, were usually burned, many persons together. There had been such a public burning on the very day of my trial. Had I been sent back to my cell, to wait for the next great fire? No, my cell had had a dry stone floor, and light was not completely shut out.

I at once got to my feet, trembling all over. I threw my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing, yet I dreaded to move a step, for fear I should be stopped by the walls of a *tomb*. Perspiration stood in big cold beads on my forehead. The agony of suspense grew at last too much, and I cautiously stepped forward. My arms felt the air in front of me. My eyes strained to catch some faint ray of light. I proceeded for many

◦ **desperation** (des puh RAY shun) the state of utter hopelessness

steps, but still all was blackness, emptiness.

And now, as I continued, there came to mind a thousand vague rumors of horrors of Spanish prisons. Of some dungeons there had been strange things told—untrue things I had always thought—but yet terrifying, and too horrible to repeat, except in a whisper. Was I left to die of starvation in this underground world of darkness? Or what other torture, perhaps even worse, awaited me? That the result would be death, a cruel, bitter death, I had no doubt. I knew my judges too well to doubt that. The time and the manner of my death were the only things left in doubt now.

My hand before me at last bumped against something hard. It was a wall, seemingly of stone, very smooth, slimy, and cold. I followed it, stepping carefully. This process, however, gave me no way of knowing how large my dungeon was. I might make a complete circle and return to the point where I started without being aware of the fact. I therefore felt for the knife which had been in my pocket, when led into the inquisitorial chamber. But it was gone. My clothes had been exchanged for a robe of coarse cloth. I had thought of forcing the blade into some small crack in the wall. Instead, I tore a part of the hem from the robe. This I laid at full length on the floor, at right angles to the wall. In feeling my way around the dungeon, I could not fail to feel the heavy cloth upon completing one trip.

So, at least, I thought. But I had not counted on the large size of the dungeon, or upon my own weakness. The ground was moist and slippery. I staggered onward for some time, when I stumbled and fell. My tired body remained flat, and sleep soon overtook me as I lay there.

Upon awakening, I stretched forth an arm. There beside me were a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water. I was much too exhausted to wonder about them, but I ate and drank eagerly. Shortly afterward I continued my tour of the prison, and at last came upon the strip of cloth. Up to the time I fell, I had counted 52 steps. Upon the rest of my walk, I had counted 48 more. There were in all then, 100 steps. Counting two steps to the yard, I judged the distance around the walls to be 50 yards.

Leaving the wall, I decided to cross the area. At first I proceeded with extreme care. The floor, although seemingly of solid material, was treacherous with slime. After some time, however, I took courage. I did not hesitate to step firmly, trying to cross in as straight a line as possible. I had gone 10 or 12 steps in this manner, when the strip of cloth from my robe became tangled between my legs. I stepped on it, and fell violently on my face. In the confusion of my fall, I did not realize a somewhat strange fact. But a few seconds afterward, as I lay there, it became clear: My chin rested upon the floor, but the upper part of my face, seemingly lower, touched nothing. At

• inquisitorial (in kwiz i TOHR ee ul) having to do with inquiry or questioning (here the courtroom of the Spanish Inquisition)

the same time, my forehead seemed bathed in cold, stale air. The peculiar smell of decaying fungus rose to my nose. I put forward my arm—and shuddered. I had fallen at the very edge of a circular pit. Feeling around on the rough stone wall just below the edge, I succeeded in breaking off a small piece. This I let fall into the pit. For many seconds I listened to its sound as it hit against the sides of the pit below. Finally there came the sudden plunge into water. At the same moment there came a sound from overhead. A door seemed to open and close quickly. A faint gleam of light flashed suddenly through the gloom, and as rapidly faded away.

I saw clearly the doom that had been prepared for me. Another step before my fall, and the world would have seen me no more. Shaking in every limb, I found my way back to the wall, resolving to die there rather than risk the dangers of the wells, which I now imagined in many places about the dungeon.

The terrors in my mind kept me awake for many long hours; but at last I slept again. Upon waking up, I found by my side, as before, a loaf and a pitcher of water. A burning thirst made me empty the pitcher at once. Then, for some reason, I slept once more. A deep sleep fell upon me—a sleep like that of death. How long it lasted, I know not. But when I opened my eyes, the objects

around me were visible. By a wild, yellowish light, I could see the size and details of my prison.

In its size I had been greatly mistaken. The whole distance around was not more than 25 yards. How had I gone so wrong in measuring it? The truth at last flashed upon me. I had counted 52 paces to the point when I fell. I must then have been within a step or two of the strip of cloth. I then slept. Upon awakening, I must have returned upon my steps. In that way I had supposed the distance around to be nearly double what it actually was. My confusion prevented me from realizing that I began my tour with the wall to the left, and ended it with the wall to the right.

The general shape of the prison was square. I examined the walls first. What I had taken for stone now seemed to be iron, in huge plates. I now noticed the floor, too, which was of stone. In the center yawned the round pit from whose jaws I had escaped. It was the only one in the dungeon.

All this I saw indistinctly and with much effort, for much had changed during my deep sleep. I now lay upon my back. Under me was some kind of low framework of wood. To this I was tied by a long rope. It passed in many convolutions around my limbs and body. My head, however, was free, as was my left arm. I could, with much effort, supply myself with food from a dish by my side on the floor. I saw, to

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- fungus (FUN gus) growths like mushrooms, molds, and mildews
 - resolving (ri ZOLV ing) determining; deciding firmly
 - plate (PLAYT) large, flat sheet, as of glass
 - convolution (kon vuh LOO shun) coil; twisting roll

my horror, that the pitcher had been removed. I saw to my horror—for I was wild with thirst. This thirst seemed part of the plan of my tormentors, for the food in the dish was highly seasoned.

Looking upward, I studied the ceiling of my prison. It was some 30 or 40 feet high. On one of its iron panels a very strange figure held my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time we have all seen often. But instead of a scythe, he held what I supposed to be the painted shape of a huge pendulum. There was something about the appearance of this pendulum that made me regard it carefully. While I gazed directly upward at it, I thought that I saw it in motion. Yes! Its sweep

was short, and of course slow. I watched it for some minutes, sometimes in fear, but more in wonder.

A slight noise attracted my notice. Looking at the floor, I saw several enormous rats crossing it. They had come from the pit, just within view on my right. Even as I gazed, they came up in troops. Their hungry eyes seemed drawn by the scent of the meat. It required much effort to scare them away.

It might have been half an hour before I again looked upward. What I then saw amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased by nearly a yard. Its speed was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the fact that it had *descended*. I now observed it with horror. The lower edge, I saw, was



- scythe (SYTH) a long, curved blade used for cutting grass, etc.
- sweep (SWEEP) steady, curving motion

a curve of glistening steel. It was about a foot long, as sharp as a razor. Attached to the solid and broad part of the pendulum above, the *shining* blade hissed as it swung through the air.

[I could no longer doubt the doom that waited for me. My knowledge of the pit had become known to my persecutors. Having failed to fall, I now awaited a different destruction. How can I describe the long, long hours of horror? I lay there counting the rushing swings of the steel. Inch by inch, down and down it slowly came. Days seemed to pass before it swept so close as to fan me with its horrid breath. The odor of the sharp steel seemed to force its way into my nostrils. I prayed. I prayed for its speedy descent. I grew mad. I struggled to force myself upward against the sweep of the fearful blade. And then I fell suddenly calm. I lay there smiling at the glittering death, like a child at some rare toy.]

There was another period of blackness then. I swooned again—but not for long. Upon my recovery, I felt very sick and weak. Even in the agony of that period, my human nature wanted food. With painful effort I stretched out my left arm. I picked up a small piece of meat that had been spared me by the rats. As I put it between my lips, there rushed to my mind a half-formed thought of joy.] Of hope, even. It was, as I say, a half-formed thought. It was not completed.] I felt that it was of hope. But I felt also that it had disappeared as

it had started to form in my mind. In vain I struggled to regain it. Long suffering had affected my mind. I was an imbecile—an idiot.]

The swing of the pendulum was at right angles to my body. I saw that the knife passed over the region of my heart. It would slice through the cloth of my robe. It would return and repeat its slicing—again—and again. That would be all that would happen—at first. The hissing blade would cut only the cloth. In spite of its wide sweep—some 30 feet or more—it would at first cut only the cloth. And at this thought I paused. I forced myself to think about the sound that the steel would make as it passed across the garment.

Down—steadily down it crept. I took mad pleasure in contrasting its slow descent to its whistling sidelong speed. To the right. To the left. Far and wide. It was the shriek of a damned spirit. I laughed. I howled.

Down—certainly, cruelly down! It swung within three inches of my chest. I struggled violently—furiously—to free my left arm. It was free only from the elbow to the hand. That hand could reach from the platter on the floor to my mouth. But no farther. If I could have broken the rope above the elbow, I would have seized the top part of the pendulum. I might as well have tried to stop an avalanche.

Down—down—steadily down! I gasped and struggled convulsively at each rushing swing. I shrank at its

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- persecutor (PUR suh kyoo tur) one one persecutes, or causes others to suffer
 - imbecile (IM buh sil) one with a very weak mind
 - convulsively (kun VUL siv lee) with instinctive, uncontrolled muscular movements

every sweep over me. My eyes followed its outward and upward movements with despair. They closed themselves at its descent, as though death would have been a relief.

I saw that some 10 or 12 sweeps would bring the sharp steel in actual contact with my robe. And suddenly there came over me a calm, collected feeling—the calmness of despair. For the first time in many hours—or perhaps days—I *thought*. I really used my mind. It now occurred to me that the rope that held me was a strange one. I was tied by no separate cord. The first stroke of the razor-sharp knife across the band would detach it. I would then be able to unwind it from my body with my left hand. But was it likely that my persecutors had not foreseen this possibility? Was it likely that the strap crossed my chest in the path of the pendulum? Dreading to find my last hope crushed, I raised my head and struggled for a clear view of my body. The rope circled my body and limbs closely in all places—*except in the path of the destroying steel blade*.

I dropped my head back to its original position. All at once a new thought flashed upon my mind. It was the unformed half of that idea of hope I have already mentioned. The whole thought was now present—feeble, perhaps insane, but still complete. I proceeded at once, with the nervous energy of despair, to turn that thought into action.

For many hours the floor below me had been swarming with rats. They were wild with hunger. Their red eyes

glared at me, as if they awaited my death to make me their meal. They had eaten, in spite of my efforts, all but a few pieces of the meat on the dish. My hand had waved above the platter almost constantly. In their hunger, the rats had frequently fastened their sharp teeth to my fingers.

I gathered up all the pieces of oily and spicy meat that remained. With them, I rubbed the rope wherever I could reach it. Then I lay breathlessly still.

At first, the starving animals were startled and terrified at the change—the cessation of all movement. They shrank back. But this was only for a moment. I had not been mistaken about their hunger. Noticing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest leaped upon the framework under me. They smelled at the rope. This seemed the signal for a general rush, and forth they hurried in fresh troops. They clung to the wood. They overran it. They leaped in hundreds upon my body. The regular movements of the pendulum bothered them not at all. Avoiding its strokes, they busied themselves with the rope. They pressed—They swarmed upon me in growing heaps. Their cold lips found my own. A kind of disgust for which the world has no name chilled my heart. Yet one minute more, and I felt that the struggle would be over. Clearly I felt the loosening of the rope. I knew that in more than one place it must be already chewed through. With a more than human effort I lay *still*.

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- collected (kuh LEK tid) controlled; undisturbed
 - cessation (se SAY shun) stopping; ceasing

I had not suffered in vain. I at last felt that I was *free*. The rope hung in ribbons from my body. But the pendulum already pressed upon my chest. It had sliced through the cloth of the robe. Twice again it swung, and a sharp pain shot through me. Now the moment of escape had arrived. At a wave of my hand the rats hurried away. With a steady movement—cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and slow—I slid to my right, beyond the reach of the pendulum. For the moment, at least, *I was free*.

Free!—and still in the hands of the Inquisition! I stood up, moving away from my wooden bed of horror. As I did so, the motion of the huge pendulum stopped. I watched it pulled up, by some hidden force, through the ceiling. This was a lesson I took to heart. My every motion, I knew, was being watched. Free!—I had escaped death in *one* form, then death in another. Now, I *was certain* I would face death again.

Unreal! Even as I stood there, the breath of heated iron came to my nostrils. I rolled my eyes nervously around on the walls of iron that surrounded me. A choking odor filled the prison. I panted. I gasped for breath. There could be no doubt of the plan of my persecutors. Oh, demons! I shrank from the metal, beginning to glow now, to the center of the cell. At the thought of the fiery death that lay ahead, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to the edge of the pit. I threw my vision below. Yet, for a wild moment, my spirit refused to

allow my body to jump. Oh! for a voice to speak!—oh! horror!—oh! any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed away from the pit. I buried my face in my hands—weeping bitterly.

The heat rapidly increased. Once again I looked up, shuddering. There had been a second change in the cell—a change in *shape*. The demons of the Inquisition who held me had been angered by my second escape. Now they would play with my terrors no longer. The room had been square. In an instant it had changed its shape to that of a diamond. And the change had not stopped there. Even as I watched, the red-hot walls closed slowly inward. Could I resist the glow? Could I withstand the pressure? And now, flatter and flatter grew the diamond. Its center, and of course its greatest width, came right over the yawning jaws of the pit. I shrank back—but the closing walls pressed me onward. At last there was no longer an inch of floor to stand on. I struggled no more. I tottered upon the pit's edge with one loud, long, and final scream of despair. I tried not to look down—

There was the discordant hum of human voices! There was a loud blast of trumpets! There was a great grinding noise, as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An arm stretched out and caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the pit. It was the arm of General LaSalle. The French army had entered the city. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies.

* balm (BAHM) comforting ointment or salve
 * discordant (dis KOR dunt) quarreling; struggling