

A Tell-Tale Heart

By Edgar Allen Poe

True! Nervous -- very, very nervous I had been and am! But why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses -- not destroyed them.

Above all was the sense of hearing. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in the underworld. How, then, am I mad? Observe how healthily -- how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain. 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 bird, a vulture -- a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell on me, my blood ran cold; and so -- very slowly -- I made up my

mind to take the life of the old man, and free myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point. You think that I am mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely and carefully I went to work!

I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, late at night, I turned the lock of his door and opened it – oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening big enough for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed that no light shone out, and then I stuck in my head. I moved it slowly, very slowly, so that I might not interfere with the old mans sleep. And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern just so much that a single thin ray of light fell upon the vulture eye.

And this I did for seven long nights -- but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old

man who was a problem for me, but his Evil Eye.

On the eighth night, I was more than usually careful in opening the door. I had my head in and was about to open the lantern, when my finger slid on a piece of metal and made a noise. The old man sat up in bed, crying out "Whos there?"

I kept still and said nothing. I did not move a muscle for a whole hour. During that time, I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening -- just as I have done, night after night.

Then I heard a noise, and I knew it was the sound of human terror. It was the low sound that arises from the bottom of the soul. I knew the sound well. Many a night, late at night, when all the world slept, it has welled up from deep within my own chest. I say I knew it well.

I knew what the old man felt, and felt sorry for him, although I laughed to myself. I knew that

he had been lying awake ever since the first noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him.

When I had waited a long time, without hearing him lie down, I decided to open a little -- a very, very little -- crack in the lantern. So I opened it. You cannot imagine how carefully, carefully. Finally, a single ray of light shot from out and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open -- wide, wide open -- and I grew angry as I looked at it. I saw it clearly -- all a dull blue, with a horrible veil over it that chilled my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old mans face or person. For I had directed the light exactly upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but a kind of over-sensitivity? Now, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when inside a piece of cotton. I knew that sound well,

too. It was the beating of the old mans heart. It increased my anger.

But even yet I kept still. I hardly breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I attempted to keep the ray of light upon the eye. But the beating of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every second. The old mans terror must have been extreme! The beating grew louder, I say, louder every moment!

And now at the dead hour of the night, in the horrible silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst.

And now a new fear seized me -- the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old mans hour had come! With a loud shout, I threw open the lantern and burst into the room.

He cried once -- once only. Without delay, I forced him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled, to find the action so far done.

But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a quiet sound. This, however, did not concern me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length, it stopped. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the body. I placed my hand over his heart and held it there many minutes. There was no movement. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise steps I took for hiding the body. I worked quickly, but in silence. First of all, I took apart the body. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three pieces of wood from the flooring, and placed his body parts under the room. I then replaced the wooden boards so

well that no human eye -- not even his -- could have seen anything wrong.

There was nothing to wash out -- no mark of any kind -- no blood whatever. I had been too smart for that. A tub had caught all -- ha! ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock in the morning. As a clock sounded the hour, there came a noise 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 said they were officers of the police. A cry had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of a crime had been aroused; information had been given at the police office, and the officers had been sent to search the building.

I smiled -- for what had I to fear? The cry, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I said, was not in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I told them to search -- search well. I led them, at length, to his room. I

brought chairs there, and told them to rest. I placed my own seat upon the very place under which lay the body of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. I was completely at ease. They sat, and while I answered happily, they talked of common things. But, after a while, I felt myself getting weak and wished them gone. My head hurt, and I had a ringing in my ears; but still they sat and talked.

The ringing became more severe. I talked more freely to do away with the feeling. But it continued until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

I talked more and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased -- and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound like a watch makes when inside a piece of cotton. I had trouble breathing -- and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly -- more loudly; but the noise increased. I stood up and argued about

silly things, in a high voice and with violent hand movements. But the noise kept increasing.

Why would they not be gone? I walked across the floor with heavy steps, as if excited to anger by the observations of the men -- but the noise increased. What could I do? I swung my chair and moved it upon the floor, but the noise continually increased. It grew louder -- louder - - louder! And still the men talked pleasantly, and smiled.

Was it possible they heard not? No, no! They heard! They suspected! They knew! They were making a joke of my horror! This I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this pain! I could bear those smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! And now -- again! Louder! Louder! Louder!

"Villains!" I cried, "Pretend no more! I admit the deed! Tear up the floor boards! Here, here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!"