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Cambridge University Press
978-84-832-3532-4 – Tales of Terror
Edgar Allan Poe and others
Excerpt
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Discovery
Readers

Tales of Terror

Edgar Allan Poe and others

*selected and retold
by Jane Rollason*



The Tell-Tale Heart

A young man lives in a room in an old man's house. But there is something he does not like about the old man.



How did I first get the idea? I do not know. But there it was, in my head.

I loved the old man. He never hurt me. He was always kind to me. I did not want his money.

It was his eye! Yes, that was it. The old man had one light blue eye. But it wasn't clear blue. It was cloudy, like milk. When this eye looked at me, my blood ran cold.

Slowly, the idea grew inside me.

‘I must kill the old man,’ I thought, ‘and then that terrible eye will never look at me again.’

Now, you think I am mad. But madmen are stupid. I was not mad. I was clever and careful. I made a plan and I followed it.

I was very kind to the old man in the week before I killed him. Every night, at about midnight, I carefully opened his door. Slowly ... very slowly ... and quietly, I put my head into the room. When my head was in the room, I opened the little door of my lantern.¹ The light fell on the old man’s face. It fell on his eye. But his eye was always closed, so I could not kill him. I did not feel sick when the eye was closed. I only felt sick when it was open. The evil² eye.

And each morning, I went into his room with a smile on my face.

‘Did you sleep well?’ I asked him cheerfully.

He did not know that I visited him every night.

On the eighth night I was more careful. I opened the door very slowly. That night I felt strong. The old man knew nothing of my plan. I almost laughed. Suddenly he moved on the bed. Did I stop? Did I leave the room? No, I didn’t. The room was black in the dark. I knew that the old man could see nothing.

My head was in the room. I was ready to open the little door of my lantern. He must be asleep again. I made a little noise with the light.

‘Who’s there?’ he cried and sat up in bed.

I did not move. I said nothing. For an hour I did not move. He was sitting up in bed, listening. He was growing more afraid. His heart was beating³ hard.

Then he made a sound. It was the sound of terror from a man’s heart. I was sorry for him.

He was saying to himself, ‘It was only the wind. It was only a mouse under the bed. It was nothing.’

But he did not believe it. He knew that evil was in the room. He did not see my head in the room. But he felt it.

I waited a long time. Then I decided to open my lantern. Very, very slowly, I opened it a little. A thin line of light fell on the man's evil eye.

The eye was open – round and open. I felt sick. I became angry. My blood ran cold through my body. My hands were hot. My hair stood up on my skin. I did not see the man's face. I only saw the eye. Then I heard a sound. I knew that sound well. Bang, bang, bang. It grew quicker and louder. It was the beating of the old man's heart.

But I did not move. I kept the light on the eye. I felt terror in my heart at that dead hour of the night. The noise grew louder. BANG, BANG, BANG!

'A neighbour will hear,' I suddenly thought.

This was the time! With a loud shout, I jumped into the room. He screamed. But he screamed only once. I pulled him to the floor. I pulled the bed on top of him. I pushed down hard on the bed. I smiled. My heart was happy.

'I have done it!' I thought.

The heart was beating but more quietly now. It beat more slowly. Finally it stopped. The old man was dead. I pulled the bed off him and looked at his body. Yes, he was dead. I placed my hand on his heart. I left it there for some minutes. The heart did not beat.

'That eye will never look at me again,' I thought.

Now you will see that I am not mad. I planned my next moves carefully. I worked quickly and quietly through the night. I pulled up part of the floor and put the body under the floor. I put the floor back and put everything back in its place.

I finished at about four o'clock. There was no sound. It was as quiet as the grave.⁴ Then someone knocked at the street door. I went to open it with an easy heart. I was not afraid.

Three policemen came in.

'A neighbour heard a scream during the night,' one of them said. 'We'd like to look around the house.'

I smiled. I was not afraid.

'Come in,' I answered cheerfully. 'It was me who screamed. I had a bad dream. The old man is away in the country.'

I took my visitors all over the house. I was not worried. I even took them into *his* bedroom. I showed them his money. It was all there. I brought chairs into the room.

'Please,' I said. 'Sit down. Perhaps you are tired.'

I placed my chair carefully – over the place where the body was.

The police were happy with my story. I made some tea for them. We sat and talked. But then I began to get a headache. I wanted the police to leave. One was telling a story and the others were laughing. I felt ill and there was a noise in my ears. The noise grew louder. It was a banging noise. I began to talk more loudly. I wanted to hide the noise. And then suddenly I understood – the noise was not in my ears, it was in the room.

What could I do? It was a beating noise. It was like a watch. The policemen did not hear it. I talked more quickly. But the noise grew louder. I stood up and walked about. I moved my chair about. My voice got higher. Oh God! What could I do? But the men were still talking and smiling. Was it possible that they couldn't hear it? No, no! They could hear it! They were laughing at my terror! They were playing games with me. I felt that I must scream or die! The noise grew louder! – louder! – LOUDER!

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‘You evil men,’ I screamed. ‘Stop this game! Yes, I did it! I did it! Pull up the floor. Here, here, look! He is here! Listen! His horrible heart is beating!’

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Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) is one of America's most famous writers. He lived an unhappy life: he was often close to madness, often drunk and always poor. He worked on magazines and newspapers and wrote science fiction, horror and detective stories. He married in 1836, but his young wife died only eleven years later. 'I became mad after that,' he said. His own death was a famous mystery. He was found drunk in a bar in Baltimore in someone else's clothes. He died in hospital a few days later.

ACTIVITIES

1 Underline the correct words in each sentence.

- 1 The *old man* / young man tells this story.
- 2 The young man plans to kill the old man because he *wants his money* / *hates his bad eye*.
- 3 The young man can't kill the old man on the first seven nights because the old man's eye is *closed* / *open*.
- 4 The old man thinks he can hear *the young man* / *the wind*.
- 5 The young man feels *happy* / *angry* after he kills the old man.
- 6 The young man puts the old man's body under *the floor* / *the bed*.
- 7 The police come to the house because *they* / *a neighbour* heard a scream.
- 8 The old man's *money* / *body* is under the young man's chair.
- 9 *The young man and the police* / *Only the young man* can hear the beating noise.

2 Answer the questions.

- 1 Why does the young man hate the old man's eye?
Because he thinks the eye is evil.
- 2 Why can't the young man kill the old man when his eye is closed?

- 3 Why does the young man say he killed the old man when he doesn't need to?

- 4 Is the young man mad?
