



THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

Written by Edgar Allan Poe

Narrated by Michael Scott

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Adaptation by Garcia Mann

Technical Production by Anita Scott



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THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

18

19

Impia tortorum longos hic turba furores

20

Sanguinis innocui, non satiata, aluit.

21

Sospite nunc patria, fracto nunc funeris antro,

22

Mors ubi dira fuit vita salusque patent.

23

24

[Here the wicked mob, unappeased,

25

long cherished a hatred of innocent blood.

26

Now that the fatherland is saved,

27

and the cave of death demolished;

28

where grim death has been, life and health appear.]

29

30

[Quatrain composed for the gates of a market

31

to be erected upon the site

32

of the Jacobin Club House at Paris.]

33

34

35 I WAS sick -- sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me,

36 and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence -- the

37 dread sentence of death -- was the last of distinct accentuation that reached my ears. After

38 that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate

39 hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of revolution -- perhaps from its association in

40 fancy with the burr of a mill wheel. And this only for a brief period; for presently I heard

41 no more. Yet, for a while, I saw; but with how terrible an exaggeration! I saw the lips of

42 the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white -- whiter than the sheet upon which I

43 trace these words -- and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their

44 expression of firmness -- of immoveable resolution -- of stern contempt of human torture.

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45 I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate, were still issuing from those lips. I saw
46 them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I
47 shuddered because no sound succeeded. I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious
48 horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies that enwrapped the
49 walls of the apartment. Then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At
50 first, they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white and slender angels who would
51 save me. But then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt
52 every fiber in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the
53 angel forms became meaningless specters, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them
54 there would be no help. Then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the
55 thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. The thought came gently and
56 stealthily, and it seemed long before it attained full appreciation. But, just as my spirit
57 came at length properly to feel and entertain it, the figures of the judges vanished, as if
58 magically, from before me. The tall candles sank into nothingness; their flames went out
59 utterly. The blackness of darkness supervened. All sensations appeared swallowed up in a
60 mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades. Then silence, and stillness, and night were
61 the universe.

62

63 I had swooned; but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost. What of it there
64 remained, I will not attempt to define, or even to describe. Yet all was not lost. In the
65 deepest slumber -- no! In delirium -- no! In a swoon -- no! In death -- no! even in the
66 grave all is not lost. Or else there is no immortality for man. Arousing from the most
67 profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of *some* dream. Yet in a second
68 afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed. In
69 the return to life from the swoon there are two stages; first, that of the sense of mental or
70 spiritual; secondly, that of the sense of physical, existence. It seems probable that if, upon
71 reaching the second stage, we could recall the impressions of the first, we should find

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72 these impressions eloquent in memories of the gulf beyond. And that gulf is -- what?
73 How at least shall we distinguish its shadows from those of the tomb? But if the
74 impressions of what I have termed the first stage, are not, at will, recalled, yet, after long
75 interval, do they not come unbidden, while we marvel whence they come? He who has
76 never swooned, is not he who finds strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coals that
77 glow. Is not he who beholds floating in mid-air the sad visions that the many may not
78 view; is not he who ponders over the perfume of some novel flower -- is not he whose
79 brain grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence which has never
80 before arrested his attention.

81
82 Amid frequent and thoughtful endeavors to remember; amid earnest struggles to regather
83 some token of the state of seeming nothingness into which my soul had lapsed, there have
84 been moments when I have dreamed of success. There have been brief, very brief periods
85 when I have conjured up remembrances which the lucid reason of a later epoch assures
86 me could have had reference only to that condition of seeming unconsciousness. These
87 shadows of memory tell, indistinctly, of tall figures that lifted and bore me in silence
88 down -- down -- still down -- until a hideous dizziness oppressed me at the mere idea of
89 the interminableness of the descent. They tell also of a vague horror at my heart, on
90 account of that heart's unnatural stillness. Then comes a sense of sudden motionlessness
91 throughout all things; as if those who bore me (a ghastly train!) had outrun, in their
92 descent, the limits of the limitless, and paused from the wearisomeness of their toil. After
93 this I call to mind flatness and dampness; and then all is madness -- the madness of a
94 memory which busies itself among forbidden things.

95
96 Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound -- the tumultuous motion of
97 the heart, and, in my ears, the sound of its beating. Then a pause in which all is blank.
98 Then again sound, and motion, and touch -- a tingling sensation pervading my frame.

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99 Then the mere consciousness of existence, without thought -- a condition which lasted
100 long. Then, very suddenly, thought, and shuddering terror, and earnest endeavor to
101 comprehend my true state. Then a strong desire to lapse into insensibility. Then a rushing
102 revival of soul and a successful effort to move. And now a full memory of the trial, of the
103 judges, of the sable draperies, of the sentence, of the sickness, of the swoon. Then entire
104 forgetfulness of all that followed; of all that a later day and much earnestness of endeavor
105 have enabled me vaguely to recall.

106

107 So far, I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back, unbound. I reached out
108 my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. There I allowed it to remain
109 for many minutes, while I strove to imagine where and what I could be. I longed, yet
110 dared not to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not
111 that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be
112 nothing to see. At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed my eyes.
113 My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed
114 me. I struggled for breath. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me.
115 The atmosphere was intolerably close. I still lay quietly, and made effort to exercise my
116 reason. I brought to mind the inquisitorial proceedings, and attempted from that point to
117 deduce my real condition. The sentence had passed; and it appeared to me that a very
118 long interval of time had since elapsed. Yet not for a moment did I suppose myself
119 actually dead.

120

121 Such a supposition, notwithstanding what we read in fiction, is altogether inconsistent
122 with real existence; -- but where and in what state was I? The condemned to death, I
123 knew, perished usually at the autos-da-fe, and one of these had been held on the very
124 night of the day of my trial. Had I been remanded to my dungeon, to await the next
125 sacrifice, which would not take place for many months? This I at once saw could not be.

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126 Victims had been in immediate demand. Moreover, my dungeon, as well as all the
127 condemned cells at Toledo, had stone floors, and light was not altogether excluded.

128

129 A fearful idea now suddenly drove the blood in torrents upon my heart, and for a brief
130 period, I once more relapsed into insensibility. Upon recovering, I at once started to my
131 feet, trembling convulsively in every fiber. I thrust my arms wildly above and around me
132 in all directions. I felt nothing; yet dreaded to move a step, lest I should be impeded by
133 the walls of a tomb. Perspiration burst from every pore, and stood in cold big beads upon
134 my forehead. The agony of suspense grew at length intolerable, and I cautiously moved
135 forward, with my arms extended, and my eyes straining from their sockets, in the hope of
136 catching some faint ray of light. I proceeded for many paces; but still all was blackness
137 and vacancy. I breathed more freely. It seemed evident that mine was not, at least, the
138 most hideous of fates.

139

140 And now, as I still continued to step cautiously onward, there came thronging upon my
141 recollection a thousand vague rumors of the horrors of Toledo. Of the dungeons there had
142 been strange things narrated -- fables I had always deemed them -- but yet strange, and
143 too ghastly to repeat, save in a whisper. Was I left to perish of starvation in this
144 subterranean world of darkness; or what fate, perhaps even more fearful, awaited me?
145 That the result would be death, and a death of more than customary bitterness, I knew too
146 well the character of my judges to doubt. The mode and the hour were all that occupied
147 or distracted me.

148

149 My outstretched hands at length encountered some solid obstruction. It was a wall,
150 seemingly of stone masonry -- very smooth, slimy, and cold. I followed it up; stepping
151 with all the careful distrust with which certain antique narratives had inspired me. This
152 process, however, afforded me no means of ascertaining the dimensions of my dungeon;

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153 as I might make its circuit, and return to the point whence I set out, without being aware
154 of the fact; so perfectly uniform seemed the wall. I therefore sought the knife that had
155 been in my pocket, when led into the inquisitorial chamber; but it was gone; my clothes
156 had been exchanged for a wrapper of coarse serge. I had thought of forcing the blade in
157 some minute crevice of the masonry, so as to identify my point of departure. The
158 difficulty, nevertheless, was but trivial; although, in the disorder of my fancy, it seemed
159 at first insuperable. I tore a part of the hem from the robe and placed the fragment at full
160 length, and at right angles to the wall. In groping my way around the prison, I could not
161 fail to encounter this rag upon completing the circuit. So, at least I thought: but I had not
162 counted upon the extent of the dungeon, or upon my own weakness. The ground was
163 moist and slippery. I staggered onward for some time, when I stumbled and fell. My
164 excessive fatigue induced me to remain prostrate; and sleep soon overtook me as I lay.

165

166 Upon awaking, and stretching forth an arm, I found beside me a loaf and a pitcher with
167 water. I was too much exhausted to reflect upon this circumstance, but ate and drank with
168 avidity. Shortly afterward, I resumed my tour around the prison, and with much toil came
169 at last upon the fragment of the serge.

170

171 Up to the period when I fell I had counted fifty-two paces, and upon resuming my walk, I
172 had counted forty-eight more; -- when I arrived at the rag. There were in all, then, a
173 hundred paces; and, admitting two paces to the yard, I presumed the dungeon to be fifty
174 yards in circuit. I had met, however, with many angles in the wall, and thus I could form
175 no guess at the shape of the vault; for vault, I could not help supposing it to be.

176

177 I had little object -- certainly no hope in these researches; but a vague curiosity prompted
178 me to continue them. Quitting the wall, I resolved to cross the area of the enclosure. At
179 first I proceeded with extreme caution, for the floor, although seemingly of solid material,

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180 was treacherous with slime. At length, however, I took courage, and did not hesitate to
181 step firmly; endeavoring to cross in as direct a line as possible. I had advanced some ten
182 or twelve paces in this manner, when the remnant of the torn hem of my robe became
183 entangled between my legs. I stepped on it, and fell violently on my face.

184

185 In the confusion attending my fall, I did not immediately apprehend a somewhat startling
186 circumstance, which yet, in a few seconds afterward, and while I still lay prostrate,
187 arrested my attention. It was this -- my chin rested upon the floor of the prison, but my
188 lips and the upper portion of my head, although seemingly at a less elevation than the
189 chin, touched nothing. At the same time my forehead seemed bathed in a clammy vapor,
190 and the peculiar smell of decayed fungus arose to my nostrils. I put forward my arm, and
191 shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit, whose extent, of
192 course, I had no means of ascertaining at the moment. Groping about the masonry just
193 below the margin, I succeeded in dislodging a small fragment, and let it fall into the
194 abyss. For many seconds I hearkened to its reverberations as it dashed against the sides of
195 the chasm in its descent.

196

197 At length there was a sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes. At the same
198 moment, there came a sound resembling the quick opening, and as rapid closing of a door
199 overhead, while a faint gleam of light flashed suddenly through the gloom, and as
200 suddenly faded away.

201

202 I saw clearly the doom that had been prepared for me, and congratulated myself upon the
203 timely accident by which I had escaped. Another step before my fall, and the world had
204 seen me no more. And the death just avoided, was of that very character which I had
205 regarded as fabulous and frivolous in the tales respecting the Inquisition. To the victims
206 of its tyranny, there was the choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with

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207 its most hideous moral horrors. I had been reserved for the latter. By long-suffering, my
208 nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become
209 in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture that awaited me.

210

211 Shaking in every limb, I groped my way back to the wall; resolving there to perish rather
212 than risk the terrors of the wells, of which my imagination now pictured many in various
213 positions about the dungeon. In other conditions of mind I might have had courage to end
214 my misery at once by a plunge into one of these abysses; but now I was the utmost of
215 cowards. Neither could I forget what I had read of these pits -- that the sudden extinction
216 of life formed no part of their most horrible plan.

217

218 Agitation of spirit kept me awake for many long hours; but at length I again slumbered.
219 Upon arousing, I found by my side, as before, a loaf and a pitcher of water. A burning
220 thirst consumed me, and I emptied the vessel at a draught. It must have been drugged; for
221 scarcely had I drunk, before I became irresistibly drowsy. A deep sleep fell upon me -- a
222 sleep like that of death.

223

224 How long it lasted of course, I know not; but when, once again, I unclosed my eyes, the
225 objects around me were visible. By a wild sulphurous luster, the origin of which I could
226 not at first determine, I was enabled to see the extent and aspect of the prison.

227

228 In its size, I had been greatly mistaken. The whole circuit of its walls did not exceed
229 twenty-five yards. For some minutes this fact occasioned me a world of vain trouble; vain
230 indeed! for what could be of less importance, under the terrible circumstances which
231 environed me, than the mere dimensions of my dungeon? But my soul took a wild
232 interest in trifles, and I busied myself in endeavors to account for the error I had
233 committed in my measurement. The truth at length flashed upon me. In my first attempt

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234 at exploration I had counted fifty-two paces, up to the period when I fell; I must then
235 have been within a pace or two of the fragment of serge; in fact, I had nearly performed
236 the circuit of the vault. I then slept, and upon awaking, I must have returned upon my
237 steps -- thus supposing the circuit nearly double what it actually was. My confusion of
238 mind prevented me from observing that I began my tour with the wall to the left, and
239 ended it with the wall to the right.

240

241 I had been deceived, too, in respect to the shape of the enclosure. In feeling my way I had
242 found many angles, and thus deduced an idea of great irregularity; so potent is the effect
243 of total darkness upon one arousing from lethargy or sleep! The angles were simply those
244 of a few slight depressions, or niches, at odd intervals. The general shape of the prison
245 was square. What I had taken for masonry seemed now to be iron, or some other metal, in
246 huge plates, whose sutures or joints occasioned the depression. The entire surface of this
247 metallic enclosure was rudely daubed in all the hideous and repulsive devices to which
248 the charnel superstition of the monks has given rise.

249

250 The figures of fiends in aspects of menace, with skeleton forms, and other more really
251 fearful images, overspread and disfigured the walls. I observed that the outlines of these
252 monstrosities were sufficiently distinct, but that the colors seemed faded and blurred, as if
253 from the effects of a damp atmosphere. I now noticed the floor, too, which was of stone.
254 In the center yawned the circular pit from whose jaws I had escaped; but it was the only
255 one in the dungeon.

256

257 All this I saw indistinctly and by much effort: for my personal condition had been greatly
258 changed during slumber. I now lay upon my back, and at full length, on a species of low
259 framework of wood. To this I was securely bound by a long strap resembling a surcingle.
260 It passed in many convolutions about my limbs and body, leaving at liberty only my

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261 head, and my left arm to such extent that I could, by dint of much exertion, supply myself
262 with food from an earthen dish which lay by my side on the floor. I saw, to my horror,
263 that the pitcher had been removed. I say to my horror; for I was consumed with
264 intolerable thirst. This thirst it appeared to be the design of my persecutors to stimulate:
265 for the food in the dish was meat pungently seasoned.

266

267 Looking upward, I surveyed the ceiling of my prison. It was some thirty or forty feet
268 overhead, and constructed much as the side walls. In one of its panels, a very singular
269 figure riveted my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly
270 represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to
271 be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks. There was
272 something, however, in the appearance of this machine that caused me to regard it more
273 attentively. While I gazed directly upward at it (for its position was immediately over my
274 own) I fancied that I saw it in motion. In an instant afterward the fancy was confirmed.
275 Its sweep was brief, and of course slow.

276

277 I watched it for some minutes, somewhat in fear, but more in wonder. Wearied at length
278 with observing its dull movement, I turned my eyes upon the other objects in the cell.

279

280 A slight noise attracted my notice, and, looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats
281 traversing it. They had issued from the well, which lay just within view to my right. Even
282 then, while I gazed, they came up in troops, hurriedly, with ravenous eyes, allured by the
283 scent of the meat. From this, it required much effort and attention to scare them away.

284

285 It might have been half an hour, perhaps even an hour, (for I could take but imperfect
286 note of time) before I again cast my eyes upward. What I then saw confounded and
287 amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a

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288 natural consequence, its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me
289 was the idea that it had perceptibly descended. I now observed -- with what horror it is
290 needless to say -- that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel,
291 about a foot in length from horn to horn; the horns upward, and the under edge evidently
292 as keen as that of a razor. Like a razor also, it seemed massy and heavy, tapering from the
293 edge into a solid and broad structure above. It was appended to a weighty rod of brass,
294 and the whole hissed as it swung through the air.

295

296 I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by monkish ingenuity in torture. My
297 cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents -- the pit whose
298 horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself -- the pit, typical of hell, and
299 regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments. The plunge into this pit I
300 had avoided by the merest of accidents.

301

302 I knew that surprise, or entrapment into torment, formed an important portion of all the
303 grotesquerie of these dungeon deaths. Having failed to fall, it was no part of the demon
304 plan to hurl me into the abyss; and thus (there being no alternative) a different and a
305 milder destruction awaited me. Milder! I half smiled in my agony as I thought of such
306 application of such a term.

307

308 What boots it to tell of the long, long hours of horror more than mortal, during which I
309 counted the rushing vibrations of the steel! Inch by inch -- line by line -- with a descent
310 only appreciable at intervals that seemed ages -- down and still down it came! Days
311 passed -- it might have been that many days passed -- ere it swept so closely over me as
312 to fan me with its acrid breath. The odor of the sharp steel forced itself into my nostrils. I
313 prayed -- I wearied heaven with my prayer for its more speedy descent. I grew frantically
314 mad, and struggled to force myself upward against the sweep of the fearful scimitar. Then

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315 I fell suddenly calm, and lay smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble.

316

317 There was another interval of utter insensibility; it was brief; for, upon again lapsing into
318 life there had been no perceptible descent in the pendulum. But, it might have been long;
319 for I knew there were demons who took note of my swoon, and who could have arrested
320 the vibration at pleasure. Upon my recovery, too, I felt very -- oh, inexpressibly sick and
321 weak, as if through long inanition. Even amid the agonies of that period, the human
322 nature craved food. With painful effort, I outstretched my left arm as far as my bonds
323 permitted, and took possession of the small remnant which had been spared me by the
324 rats. As I put a portion of it within my lips, there rushed to my mind a half-formed
325 thought of joy -- of hope. Yet what business had I with hope?

326

327 It was, as I say, a half formed thought -- man has many such which are never completed.
328 I felt that it was of joy -- of hope; but felt also that it had perished in its formation. In
329 vain, I struggled to perfect -- to regain it. Long-suffering had nearly annihilated all my
330 ordinary powers of mind. I was an imbecile -- an idiot.

331

332 The vibration of the pendulum was at right angles to my length. I saw that the crescent
333 was designed to cross the region of the heart. It would fray the serge of my robe -- it
334 would return and repeat its operations -- again -- and again. Notwithstanding its
335 terrifically wide sweep (some thirty feet or more) and the hissing vigor of its descent,
336 sufficient to sunder these very walls of iron, still the fraying of my robe would be all that,
337 for several minutes, it would accomplish. And at this thought I paused. I dared not go
338 farther than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a pertinacity of attention -- as if, in so
339 dwelling, I could arrest here the descent of the steel. I forced myself to ponder upon the
340 sound of the crescent, as it should pass across the garment -- upon the peculiar thrilling
341 sensation that the friction of cloth produces on the nerves. I pondered upon all this

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342 frivolity until my teeth were on edge.

343

344 Down -- steadily down it crept. I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward
345 with its lateral velocity. To the right -- to the left -- far and wide -- with the shriek of a
346 damned spirit; to my heart with the stealthy pace of the tiger! I alternately laughed and
347 howled as the one or the other idea grew predominant.

348

349 Down -- certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom! I
350 struggled violently, furiously, to free my left arm. This was free only from the elbow to
351 the hand.

352 I could reach the latter, from the platter beside me, to my mouth, with great effort, but no
353 farther. Could I have broken the fastenings above the elbow, I would have seized and
354 attempted to arrest the pendulum. I might as well have attempted to arrest an avalanche!

355

356 Down -- still unceasingly -- still inevitably down! I gasped and struggled at each
357 vibration. I shrank convulsively at its every sweep. My eyes followed its outward or
358 upward whirls with the eagerness of the most unmeaning despair; they closed themselves
359 spasmodically at the descent, although death would have been a relief, oh! how
360 unspeakable! Still I quivered in every nerve to think how slight a sinking of the
361 machinery would precipitate that keen, glistening axe upon my bosom. It was hope that
362 prompted the nerve to quiver -- the frame to shrink. It was hope -- the hope that triumphs
363 on the rack -- that whispers to the death-condemned even in the dungeons of
364 the Inquisition.

365

366 I saw that some ten or twelve vibrations would bring the steel in actual contact with my
367 robe, and with this observation, there suddenly came over my spirit all the keen, collected
368 calmness of despair. For the first time during many hours -- or perhaps days -- I thought.

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369 It now occurred to me that the bandage, or surcingle, which enveloped me, was unique. I
370 was tied by no separate cord. The first stroke of the razor-like crescent that athwart any
371 portion of the band, would so detach it that it might be unwound from my person by
372 means of my left hand. But how fearful, in that case, the proximity of the steel! The result
373 of the slightest struggle how deadly! Was it likely, moreover, that the minions of the
374 torturer had not foreseen and provided for this possibility! Was it probable that the
375 bandage crossed my bosom in the track of the pendulum? Dreading to find my faint, and,
376 as it seemed, in last hope frustrated, I so far elevated my head as to obtain a distinct view
377 of my breast.

378

379 The surcingle enveloped my limbs and body close in all directions -- save in the path of
380 the destroying crescent.

381

382 Scarcely had I dropped my head back into its original position, when there flashed upon
383 my mind what I cannot better describe than as the unformed half of that idea of
384 deliverance to which I have previously alluded, and of which a moiety only floated
385 indeterminately through my brain when I raised food to my burning lips. The whole
386 thought was now present -- feeble, scarcely sane, scarcely definite, -- but still entire. I
387 proceeded at once, with the nervous energy of despair, to attempt its execution.

388

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

393

394 They had devoured, in spite of all my efforts to prevent them, all but a small remnant of
395 the contents of the dish. I had fallen into an habitual see-saw, or wave of the hand about

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396 the platter: and, at length, the unconscious uniformity of the movement deprived it of
397 effect. In their voracity, the vermin frequently fastened their sharp fangs in my fingers.
398 With the particles of the oily and spicy viand that now remained, I thoroughly rubbed the
399 bandage wherever I could reach it. Then, raising my hand from the floor, I lay
400 breathlessly still.

401

402 At first the ravenous animals were startled and terrified at the change -- at the cessation of
403 movement. They shrank alarmedly back; many sought the well. But this was only for a
404 moment. I had not counted in vain upon their voracity.

405

406 Observing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest leaped upon the
407 frame-work, and smelt at the surcingle. This seemed the signal for a general rush. Forth
408 from the well, they hurried in fresh troops. They clung to the wood -- they overran it, and
409 leaped in hundreds upon my person. The measured movement of the pendulum disturbed
410 them not at all. Avoiding its strokes, they busied themselves with the anointed bandage.
411 They pressed -- they swarmed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. They writhed upon
412 my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure;
413 disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled, with a heavy
414 clamminess, my heart. Yet one minute, and I felt that the struggle would be over. Plainly,
415 I perceived the loosening of the bandage. I knew that in more than one place it must be
416 already severed. With a more than human resolution, I lay still.

417

418 Nor had I erred in my calculations -- nor had I endured in vain. I at length felt that I was
419 free. The surcingle hung in ribbons from my body. But the stroke of the pendulum
420 already pressed upon my bosom. It had divided the serge of the robe. It had cut through
421 the linen beneath. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain shot through every
422 nerve. But the moment of escape had arrived. At a wave of my hand, my deliverers

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423 hurried tumultuously away. With a steady movement -- cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and
424 slow -- I slid from the embrace of the bandage and beyond the reach of the scimitar. For
425 the moment, at least, I was free.

426

427 Free! -- and in the grasp of the Inquisition! I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed
428 of horror upon the stone floor of the prison, when the motion of the hellish machine
429 ceased and I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force, through the ceiling. This was a
430 lesson that I took desperately to heart. My every motion was undoubtedly watched.

431

432 Free! -- I had but escaped death in one form of agony, to be delivered unto worse than
433 death in some other. With that thought I rolled my eyes nervously around on the barriers
434 of iron that hemmed me in. Something unusual -- some change which, at first, I could not
435 appreciate distinctly -- it was obvious, had taken place in the apartment. For many
436 minutes of a dreamy and trembling abstraction, I busied myself in vain, unconnected
437 conjecture. During this period, I became aware, for the first time, of the origin of the
438 sulphurous light which illumined the cell. It proceeded from a fissure, about half an inch
439 in width, extending entirely around the prison at the base of the walls, which thus
440 appeared, and were, completely separated from the floor. I endeavored, but of course in
441 vain, to look through the aperture.

442

443 As I arose from the attempt, the mystery of the alteration in the chamber broke at once
444 upon my understanding. I have observed that, although the outlines of the figures upon
445 the walls were sufficiently distinct, yet the colors seemed blurred and indefinite. These
446 colors had now assumed, and were momentarily assuming, a startling and most intense
447 brilliancy, that gave to the spectral and fiendish portraitures an aspect that might have
448 thrilled even firmer nerves than my own. Demon eyes, of a wild and ghastly vivacity,
449 glared upon me in a thousand directions, where none had been visible before, and

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450 gleamed with the lurid luster of a fire that I could not force my imagination to regard as
451 unreal.

452

453 Unreal! -- Even while I breathed there came to my nostrils the breath of the vapor of
454 heated iron! A suffocating odor pervaded the prison! A deeper glow settled each moment
455 in the eyes that glared at my agonies! A richer tint of crimson diffused itself over the
456 pictured horrors of blood. I panted! I gasped for breath! There could be no doubt of the
457 design of my tormentors -- oh! most unrelenting! oh! most demoniac of men! I shrank
458 from the glowing metal to the center of the cell. Amid the thought of the fiery destruction
459 that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed
460 to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof
461 illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend
462 the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced -- it wrestled its way into my soul -- it
463 burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. -- Oh! for a voice to speak! -- oh! horror! --
464 oh! any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the margin, and buried my face in
465 my hands -- weeping bitterly.

466

467 The heat rapidly increased, and once again I looked up, shuddering as with a fit of the
468 ague. There had been a second change in the cell -- and now the change was obviously in
469 the form. As before, it was in vain that I, at first, endeavored to appreciate or understand
470 what was taking place. But not long was I left in doubt. The Inquisitorial vengeance had
471 been hurried by my two-fold escape, and there was to be no more dallying with the King
472 of Terrors. The room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were now acute --
473 two, consequently, obtuse. The fearful difference quickly increased with a low rumbling
474 or moaning sound. In an instant, the apartment had shifted its form into that of a lozenge.
475 But the alteration stopped not here-I neither hoped nor desired it to stop. I could have
476 clasped the red walls to my bosom as a garment of eternal peace. "Death," I said, "any

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477 death but that of the pit!" Fool! might I have not known that into the pit it was the object
478 of the burning iron to urge me? Could I resist its glow? Or, if even that, could I withstand
479 its pressure. And now, flatter and flatter grew the lozenge, with a rapidity that left me no
480 time for contemplation. Its center, and of course, its greatest width, came just over the
481 yawning gulf.

482

483 I shrank back -- but the closing walls pressed me resistlessly onward. At length for my
484 seared and writhing body there was no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the
485 prison. I struggled no more, but the agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and
486 final scream of despair. I felt that I tottered upon the brink -- I averted my eyes --

487

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

493

494 **THE END**

495