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NIGHTFALL WITH EDGAR ALLAN POE

by Eric Coble

Cast of Characters

THE RAVEN

Poe
Edgar
Roderick Usher
Madeline Usher
The Raven

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Edgar
Roderick Usher
Madeline Usher

THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

Poe
Sante
Judges (offstage)
A Soldier (offstage)

THE TELL-TALE HEART

Poe
Old Man
Policeman #1
Policeman #2

Place

The minds of madmen everywhere.

Time

The past.

Production Notes

Nightfall can be performed by 5-12 actors. The entire play runs about 80 minutes, but any given story can be left out if necessary for time or technical purposes. The set can be as simple as three or four large portable wooden frames with cloth or paper pulled over them like canvas, acting as walls, doors, windows, etc. Appropriate music is encouraged throughout at the sound designers' discretion. Props should be minimal, using everyday items to create spectacular theatrical effects.

Acknowledgements

Nightfall with Edgar Allan Poe premiered at the Cleveland Play House in October, 1996 under the direction of Scott Kanoff. Set and lights were designed by Michael Roesch, costumes by Ashley Francis, and sound by Richard Ingraham. The cast was as follows:

Poe Ben Brittain
Edgar, Policeman#1 Stacy Pendergraft
Roderick, Policeman #2..... Hal Core
Madeline, Poe Ann Keen
The Raven, Sante Felipe Ramirez

All production groups performing this play are required to include the following credits on the title page of every program:

Nightfall with Edgar Allan Poe premiered at the Cleveland Play House in October, 1996.

THE RAVEN

(The lights go down. Twelve mournful chimes from an unseen clock echo across the stage.)

Then we are in complete darkness.

We hear a match being struck...And see a flickering flame light a candle—a withered candle held by POE.

He stares at the audience in the flame's glow.)

POE. They're wrong. They say I've gone mad. But they don't know what madness is. They don't know my story. Or stories. How it all began. Let me tell you, and then you be my judges. Tell me if I'm insane. You see, it started when I lost Lenore. Have you ever lost someone or something that meant everything to you? Meant so much that when it was gone you could feel the hole it left in you? It happened to me. The memory keeps clawing at you like an animal... *(Smiles.)* ...or a bird...

(POE sets the candle on a desk and begins trying to write. Several large books lie open before him and on the floor. He has a haunted, exhausted look in his eyes, feverishly flipping through the pages by candlelight, scribbling words. Then around him appear three of his characters from "Fall of the House of Usher": EDGAR, RODERICK, and MADELINE.)

EDGAR. Once...upon a midnight dreary...

...While I pondered weak and weary,

Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—

(On the wall hangs a portrait of a beautiful woman—her features seem hazy though, hard to make out—with a wreath hung around the frame.)

MADLINE. While I nodded...nearly napping...

(From the door. Almost the ghost of a knock. POE starts in his chair.)

...suddenly there came a tapping,

As if someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

POE. 'Tis some visitor...

MADLINE. ...I muttered...

POE. ...tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more.

(POE goes back to his books.)

RODERICK.

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow...

(POE stands and moves to the portrait on the wall. He gently touches it.)

MADLINE. ...sorrow for the lost Lenore—

EDGAR. For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name
Lenore—

POE. Nameless here for evermore.

*(TAP TAP TAP. Again the ghostly scraping at the door...
But now echoed from the window.
POE turns, frightened...)*

MADLINE.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating...

POE. 'Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;
This it is and nothing more.

*(POE takes a tentative step toward the door in the candlelight...
Inching closer...)*

EDGAR. Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no
longer...

POE. *(Calling out to the closed door:)* Sir...

RODERICK. ...said I...

POE. ...or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,

That I scarce was sure I heard you...

*(POE throws open the door...
Only to see empty blackness.)*

MADLINE. Darkness there and nothing more.

(POE cautiously looks out into the blackness...)

EDGAR. Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there...

MADLINE. wondering...

RODERICK. fearing...

MADLINE. Doubting...

EDGAR. ...dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before...

(POE turns back to look at the portrait of Lenore.)

RODERICK. But the silence was unbroken,

MADLINE. and the stillness gave no token,

EDGAR. And the only word was spoken was the whispered word...

POE. ...Lenore!

EDGAR. This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word...

EDGAR / MADLINE / RODERICK. *(In an echoing ghostly whisper:)*
...Lenore!

(POE turns—frightened—looking for the source of the whisper...)

POE. ...Merely this and nothing more.

(POE closes the door and paces back to his chair, trying to calm himself—unable to sit.)

EDGAR. Back into my chamber turning,

MADLINE. all my soul within me burning...

*(TAP TAP TAP on the door and window.
POE freezes and turns pale...)*

EDGAR. ...Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.

POE. Surely...

EDGAR. ...said I...

POE. ...surely that is something on my window lattice;

(He inches toward the window.)

Let me see then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore...

'Tis the wind and nothing more!

(He throws open the window to see a looming figure in a black cloak and hood—no human features are visible.

This is the RAVEN.)

(POE stumbles backward with a shout...)

EDGAR. Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter

MADLINE. In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore...

(The RAVEN glides into the room and moves toward the portrait of Lenore...

POE moves away, terrified...)

RODERICK. Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;

MADLINE. But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—

EDGAR. Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door...

(The RAVEN stops beside the portrait... turns and "stares" at POE.)

RODERICK. ...Perched...

MADLINE. ...and sat...

EDGAR. and nothing more.

(POE tries to regain his composure, holding in his fear, laughing.)

MADLINE.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore...

POE. *(To the RAVEN:)* Though thy crest be shorn and shaven,
thou...

MADLINE. ...I said...

POE. ...art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly
shore—
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!

MADLINE. Quoth the Raven...

RAVEN. *(In a horrible whisper:)* Nevermore.

(POE is stunned—almost jumps—but keeps it all in.)

MADLINE.

Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being

RODERICK.

Ever yet was blessed by seeing bird above his chamber door—
Bird or beast upon a sculptured bust above his chamber door,
...With such name as...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

RODERICK.

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.

(Pause.)

(POE and RAVEN stare at each other in silence...)

*(POE waiting for something...
Waiting... Then...)*

RODERICK.

Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—

Till I scarcely more than muttered...

POE. Other friends have flown before—

(POE settles into his chair, staring at the RAVEN.)

On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.

RODERICK. Then the bird said...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

(Pause. POE twitches a little.)

EDGAR. Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken...

POE. Doubtless...

EDGAR. ...said I...

POE. What it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of “Never-nevermore.”

(POE smiles, picks up a book and prepares to read...)

EDGAR. But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling...

(POE scoots his chair over in front of the RAVEN to face him.)

Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;

(POE sits staring, pondering.)

Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—What
this grim,

RODERICK. ungainly,

MADLINE. ghastly,

RODERICK. gaunt,

EDGAR. and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

(POE leans close to the RAVEN, staring hard.)

MADLINE.

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;

(POE leans back in his chair, still staring.)

This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,

EDGAR. But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,

(POE turns to look at the portrait of Lenore...)

POE. She shall press, ah, nevermore!

(The lights dim.

A faint—very faint—echo of the scratching on the door begins again.

POE pauses...listening...)

RODERICK. Then methought the air grew denser, perfumed from
an unseen censer

Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.

(POE leaps to his feet and paces away from the RAVEN, yelling at himself.)

POE. Wretch!

RODERICK. ...I cried...

POE. Thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!

RODERICK. Quoth the Raven...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

(POE is now pacing, frantic...)

POE. *(To RAVEN:)* Prophet!

EDGAR. ...said I...

POE. Thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
 Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
 On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly I implore—
 Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!

EDGAR. Quoth the Raven...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

(POE is now on his knees—desperate—begging...)

POE. Prophet!

MADLINE. ...said I...

POE. Thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
 By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Eden
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore.

MADLINE. Quoth the Raven...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

(POE leaps to his feet—screaming...)

POE. Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!

MADLINE. ...I shrieked, upstarting...

(POE moves to the window—wild—furious...)

POE.

Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
 Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my
 door!

(And POE collapses on the floor at the foot of the RAVEN—crumpled in the Raven's shadow—broken down.)

RODERICK. Quoth the Raven...

RAVEN. *(Whispered:)* Nevermore.

(During the following, the lights slowly begin to fade to black on the scene behind POE.)

EDGAR. And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;

RODERICK. And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is
dreaming,

MADLINE. And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his
shadow on the floor...

*(All is dark now except POE—illuminated only by his flickering
candle...)*

RAVEN. *(Not whispered:)* ...And my soul from out that shadow that
lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted...

POE. Nevermore!

*(POE blows out the candle and we are once again in complete black-
ness.)*

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

(EDGAR steps forward out of the darkness and watches as POE and the others fade into the black. He glances around...picks up the paper POE was scribbling on, and begins to read it...)

EDGAR. “During a dull, dark and soundless day in autumn, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone through an especially dreary tract of land; and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within sight of the melancholy House of Usher.”

(Lights slowly come up behind EDGAR to illuminate a looming structure—it looks like a nightmarish outline of a house—lit from below to cast eerie shadows up and across its jagged outline.)

(EDGAR puts down Poe’s papers and slowly enters the story.)

I know not why it was, but my very first glimpse of the building filled my soul with absolute gloom and despair. The huge house, the barren landscape—the bleak walls, the vacant eye-like windows—the few rank hedges—a few decaying white tree trunks. And I felt this iciness; a sinking, sickening of my heart. But why? What was it that so unnerved me about the house of Usher? I looked down into the dark still lake that lay around the building—and again a cold fear ran through me.

(He surveys the building...and approaches it.)

As I approached I began to feel an atmosphere around the house. A feeling reeking up from the decaying trees, the gray wall, the silent lake. A sickening and mystic odor...

(He reaches out to touch the building...)

(Pauses...Staring...)

The stones are old. Discolored. Tiny fungus have spread over the entire building...what have I gotten myself into? The stones are crumbling, but the building seems solid enough. Only a single barely visible crack runs down from the roof—criss-crossing all the way down the front of the house into the black waters of the lake.

(Pause.)

What am I doing here? What, indeed.

(He raps on the heavy front door. Pause. He knocks again. Silence. Then he pushes on the door. It creaks open...)

Roderick? Roderick, are you here?

(Silence. EDGAR looks around...Then steps carefully inside.)

Roderick? Roderick Usher? It's me. I received your letter. Are you here? *(Taking a few steps further:)* I...I've come as you requested. Are you...are you here, Roderick?

(Lights come up on USHER lying on a sofa—dead still.)

(Whispered:) Roderick?...Usher, is that you?

(USHER's eyes snap open and he bolts off the sofa—staring at EDGAR. Pause.)

(Then USHER shakes the startled EDGAR's hand very formally.)

USHER. My friend! My friend, you have come! At last! At last you have arrived! Oh! How well you look—thank you, thank you so much...

(He suddenly seems to lose all his energy and falls back onto the sofa.)

...for coming...

(He stares at EDGAR. Pause.)

EDGAR. Are you feeling well?

(Pause. USHER continues staring at him.)

You...ah...you look...well.

(USHER stands again and begins pacing.)

USHER. No, I do not.

EDGAR. Ah. Well. Yes. To be quite honest...

USHER. You hardly recognized me, did you? Your friend from childhood. Childhood!

EDGAR. Well, Roderick, it's been many years since our last meeting...

USHER. You were ever my only friend. You and my darling sister Madeline. You two were all I had...

EDGAR. How is Madeline?

USHER. Do I really look so changed?

EDGAR. Well, to be quite frank...

USHER. Yes, yes, yes. And that is why you are here, is it not? Did I not make myself clear in the letter?

EDGAR. Oh, well, yes...

USHER. I am ill! Bodily and mentally ill—there's a darkness in this house which...which...and that is why I desired to see you, as my best—my only—personal friend. To cheer me. You remember the laughter we shared as children?

EDGAR. Yes, yes, quite.

USHER. And we shall laugh again. You shall yet cure my melancholy. You may yet...

(Just then a ghostly woman in white passes by an open doorway—trance like. This is MADELINE USHER. EDGAR notices her just as she disappears again...)

EDGAR. Madeline? Was that your sister, Roderick?

USHER. *(Slumping onto the sofa:)* Do I really appear so changed?

EDGAR. I thought I just saw your sister...

USHER. I know the cause...I know the root of my transformation, friend. And it shall not claim me.

EDGAR. What? Usher, what are you saying?

USHER. I am the last in my family. I have no children, my sister has no children, and we are our parents' only children.

EDGAR. Yes, I seem to remember that.

USHER. And we have always, always lived in this house.

EDGAR. Roderick, is Madeline...

USHER. (*Standing:*) But we always had our art! Our paintings and music were our children—and our charity! Oh, we were famous! The House of Usher meant something then!

(Again MADELINE passes by the doorway. EDGAR moves for her, but she is gone.)

EDGAR. Roderick...

USHER. (*Fidgeting:*) I want to read. Will you read with me, friend?

EDGAR. I...I really...

USHER. (*Standing and pacing:*) I notice you haven't asked after Madeline.

EDGAR. What?

USHER. Do you not know nor care what torment my fair sister endures?

EDGAR. No! I mean, yes! I have been...

(USHER collapses back onto the sofa.)

USHER. My last and only relation on earth. Her death will leave me the last of the ancient race of Ushers.

(He puts his head in his hands.)

EDGAR. What's wrong with her, Roderick? What's happening?

USHER. Her doctors are baffled. She's wasting away. Her muscles freeze up. She has no awareness of her surroundings. Of me. She's fought valiantly for so long...but she's giving in...succumbing to the disease. If you see her at all tonight, it will probably be the last time—at least alive.

(EDGAR is in shock. He looks at the doorway...)

EDGAR. Usher. What is going on here?

USHER. I must rest now. Tomorrow we may begin my own course of remedy. If I cannot save Madeline, perhaps I can at least save my own soul.

(He wanders off. Pause. EDGAR stands speechless...Then he turns to the audience.)

(Lights change.)

EDGAR. Why am I here? Can you feel it? The iciness? The smell of decay...of death...But I can't leave. Not now. I promised him I'd visit for several weeks. Possibly longer. Ha. It's just my imagination. Nerves. What have I to fear? But...it's as if you can touch the air...or it can touch you...

(He scoops up a stack of books. USHER returns and settles onto the sofa.)

EDGAR. Shall we read some poetry today?

USHER. If you wish.

EDGAR. Well, I seem to have found some rather cheerful poems...

USHER. I did enjoy that one yesterday.

EDGAR. Good. Which one was that?

USHER. The one about the man who lost his entire family and went mad with grief.

EDGAR. Yes. Well, I believe you picked that one. Personally, I found it rather depressing.

USHER. It seemed truthful somehow. More true to the world.

EDGAR. Well, listen to this...

(He starts to read...)

USHER. I have composed some verse.

EDGAR. Really? Oh, please, well, let us hear it! Perhaps your muse is returning to you...What...ah, what is the subject of your verse, Usher?

USHER. A house. A beautiful palace owned by a king named "Thought."

EDGAR. Ah. I like that. How does it proceed?

USHER. "But evil things, in robes of sorrow,

Assailed the gentleman's estate;
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old-time entombed."

EDGAR. Ah. Well...

USHER. "And travelers now within the valley,
Through red-litten windows, see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more."

(He looks at EDGAR. Pause.)

EDGAR. And that was supposed to cheer you up, was it?

USHER. I used to love poetry, but now every sound fills me with horror. *(Pacing)* All my senses are heightened it seems. Unnaturally, horribly heightened. Only the most boring food is tolerable. I can only wear clothes of certain textures. The stink of all flowers maddens me, my eyes are tortured by even a faint glimpse of sunlight...

EDGAR. Have you consulted a doctor?

USHER. Oh. I'm sure it's nothing. It will pass. Yes? It's simply a...a nervous affection. *(Sitting.)* A family evil—and one for which I despair to find a remedy.

EDGAR. Now, Roderick, we'll find something...

USHER. I am afraid, my friend. Very afraid.

EDGAR. Of what?

USHER. Of terror. I am afraid...of my own terror...

EDGAR. You're not making sense, Roderick, perhaps you should rest...

USHER. (*Wandering off:*) The time will arrive, sooner or later, when I'll abandon life and reason altogether, in my struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear.

(*And he is gone. EDGAR turns to the audience.*)

EDGAR. Days passed. We painted and read together. But the closer I got to Usher—the better I knew him—the more I realized how futile it is to try to cheer a mind which pours darkness upon everything in the universe, in one unending radiation of gloom.

(*USHER enters sadly, holding a small canvas. He holds it so neither EDGAR nor the audience can see the painting.*)

USHER. I have finished my painting.

EDGAR. Really? Do let me see it. I hope it has a happier feel than... (*Taking the canvas:*) Um. What is it?

USHER. What does it look like?

EDGAR. It has these low walls. Smooth. White. Obviously deep underground.

USHER. Obviously.

EDGAR. No doors. No way out whatsoever.

USHER. None.

EDGAR. It looks like a tomb.

USHER. I believe that it's the future.

EDGAR. Roderick. I hope you won't be offended, but...how can I put this. You are the most depressing man I've ever met.

USHER. Oh, it's not me, my friend. It's the house.

EDGAR. The house.

USHER. The home of my forefathers. The dead trees, the air itself...it's alive. This house has molded the destiny of my family for centuries and it now twists me into what you now see—what I am.

(*Pause.*)

EDGAR. How long did I say I was staying?

USHER. You should know. Madeline died earlier this evening.

EDGAR. What?

USHER. My sister is no more.

EDGAR. Roderick. I'm so sorry.

USHER. I need your help.

EDGAR. Certainly. What can I do?

USHER. Help me preserve her corpse for a fortnight.

EDGAR. What? Why?

USHER. Oh, don't worry. She'll receive a proper burial. But the family cemetery is very far away, and a storm is moving in...

EDGAR. True, but...

USHER. And the nature of her disease. I don't want to leave her exposed to the air here in the house.

EDGAR. I understand.

USHER. And the doctors are all too eager to perform their experiments to find out what was wrong.

EDGAR. Right.

USHER. So I wish to place her deep within one of the vaults in the main walls of this building.

EDGAR. Well...I don't...alright.

USHER. And we must act at once.

(Lights dim. The two move offstage.)

(We hear the grating of a huge rusted iron door opening. EDGAR and USHER re-enter.)

(USHER holds a little lantern. They are now in the tomb.)

EDGAR. What is this place, Usher?

USHER. In feudal times it was used for the worst kind of dungeon, and more recently to store gunpowder.

EDGAR. That explains the copper floor and that huge iron door.

USHER. I think you should know—this tomb is directly beneath your room upstairs.

EDGAR. Well, that's just done wonders for my sleep. Thank you.

(USHER opens the coffin lid.)

USHER. We were twins. We could almost read each other's thoughts. No one could explain it. As children we would play the most amazing music together...

EDGAR. It almost looks as if she's...smiling...

USHER. *(Closing the lid:)* The nature of her illness. The muscles froze that way. I think we should leave.

(They move the coffin aside and head out. We hear the huge iron door creak shut...)

And close with great finality.

Silence. Then a faint sound?

...A whisper?)

(Lights change. EDGAR re-enters.)

EDGAR. *(To the audience:)* Several days since we buried her. And Roderick continues to change...for the worse...

(USHER enters—disoriented, afraid—yet struggling to control himself. He wanders out mumbling.)

EDGAR. Roderick, would you care to play some music?

(USHER re-enters and speaks in a nervous, higher-pitched tone.)

USHER. Ah! My friend! You are here! Here you are!

EDGAR. Is something wrong?

USHER. Wrong? Wrong. Oh dear, if you only...wrong!

(Pause.)

(USHER stands listening for something.)

(Then to Edgar...)

What? What did you say?

EDGAR. When?

USHER. Just now.

EDGAR. Nothing.

USHER. You...heard nothing?

EDGAR. No. Do you?

USHER. No! I hear nothing! Nothing at all! Wrong! What could possibly be...good-bye.

(He hurries out.)

EDGAR. Wait!

(Pause. Then to audience:)

Did you just hear something? I thought...my imagination. Usher's got me hearing things now too. Sleep. We all just need...sleep.

(Lights dim. EDGAR fearfully goes to his bedroom and prepares for sleep.)

(He lies down. Silence. He tosses and turns...Then bolts upright.)

There! Did you hear that?? No. It's gone now...Who's there? In the shadows...it's nothing. Nothing. The house is affecting my brain. The dark, tattered furniture. The storm outside.

(We suddenly hear the wind howling outside.)

It's been seven or eight days since we buried Madeline in the dungeon. Eight...or seven...I can't do this. I leave tomorrow.

(He leaps out of bed.)

First thing tomorrow I leave. Yes. I feel better already.

(To himself, settling back in:)

I'm sorry, Roderick, but I just can't stay a moment longer...

(A low grating sound is heard above the storm.)

Couldn't hurt to pack now, I suppose.

(He flies into motion.)

Maybe I shouldn't sleep tonight at all. Yes. Wouldn't want to oversleep. No.

(A light shines through his doorway. EDGAR freezes. Rap rap rap. On the door.)

That's not my imagination, is it?

(Pause. Then the door slowly opens to reveal USHER—standing there holding a lamp—staring at EDGAR. Eerie shadows play over his face. He is trembling—barely controlling hysteria.)

Usher?

USHER. And have you not seen it?

(Pause.)

EDGAR. Seen what, Roderick?

USHER. You have not seen it? But stay—you shall.

(He races over and throws open a window. The storm is deafening—wind and rain blowing over both of them. EDGAR struggles over to him...)

EDGAR. *(Yelling:)* Roderick!

(He slams the window shut. The storm still rages outside.)

USHER. Did you see it?

EDGAR. I saw the storm. I saw the moon and stars were blotted out. Listen, I have to tell you...

USHER. Blotted out by the glowing haze surrounding us! The air! The House of Usher! It's here!!

(EDGAR tries to get USHER to sit...)

EDGAR. Yes, well, it's probably...it's merely electrical phenomena. Not uncommon. Or perhaps some...mist...from the lake. But keep the window closed, Roderick. Right?

(USHER sits staring at the window.)

Usher?

(Holds up a book.)

Here. I'll read to you. One of your favorites...we'll survive the night. Yes.

(EDGAR quickly closes the chamber door. USHER continues staring—wild-eyed—at the window.)

Where were we? Ah. Yes. Lancelot was about to...to break the door in to the hermit's dwelling. Yes. *(Reading:)* "And Lancelot, feeling rain upon his shoulders, and feeling the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright and cracked and ripped and tore the door all asunder, and the noise of the breaking wood rumbled throughout the forest."

(RRRUMBLE. Off in the distance. A low cracking and ripping sound from somewhere in the house.

EDGAR freezes. Looks up.)

(USHER sits staring at the window.

The rumbling sound stops.)

Did you...no. No. Nothing. Let's just...keep reading...right? Ah... *(Reading:)* "But...but the good champion Lancelot, now entering within the door, was amazed to see not the hermit, but a dragon—scaly and huge—with a fiery tongue, guarding a shield of shining brass. And Lancelot uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and died with a shriek so horrid and harsh..."

(A distant scream fills the chamber—accompanied by a low grating sound. EDGAR leaps up—terrified.)

Roderick! Did you hear that? I say did you...

(USHER has turned his chair to face the door. His chin is down on his chest—his eyes wide open, staring—and he mumbles something non-stop under his breath. He rocks back and forth, side to side, in a gentle constant movement.)

Usher, what's going on? What's happening?

(He places a hand on USHER's shoulder.)

(USHER freezes...)

Then a sickly smile crosses his lips.)

(Lights dim through the following...)

(USHER mumbles out—getting louder—to no one in particular...)

USHER. Not hear it? Yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days have I heard it—yet I dared not—miserable wretch that I am! I dared not—I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Did I not say my hearing was acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! And now—tonight—Lancelot—ha! The breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangour of the shield! Say—rather, the ripping of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles with the coppered archway of her vault! Oh, where can I run? Will she not be here in moments? Is she not hurrying to punish me for burying her? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not hear that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!

(Leaps to his feet—screaming-pointing to the door...)

Madman! I tell you that she now stands outside the door!!

(The door crashes open to reveal MADELINE of Usher. Blood on her white robes, looking torn and beaten, as if emerging from a horrible struggle. She stands trembling, about to collapse—staring at USHER...)

Then...

With a low moaning cry—building to a horrifying shriek—she hurls herself in and on top of USHER.

They crash to the floor—she writhing in death agonies—him going into shock—choking, gasping...)

(A low rumble begins to fill the theatre...)

(EDGAR starts shaking... Turns...)

Tries to leave... Can't...

Turns and races out of the room and toward the audience.)

EDGAR. And I ran...I ran and I ran, into the storm and the lightning and I looked back...and I saw a blood-red moon shining down on the mansion. And the tiny crack running down the front of the house...

(The rumble grows louder...)

...was opening up...growing wider...and wider...the red moon shining through the house—blinding...the roar...

(The rumble is deafening...)

The building splintered—crashing down—and then the long horrible shouting like the voice of a thousand waters...

(Silence.)

...and the “House of Usher” ...was no more.

(Lights fade on the trembling EDGAR...Staring at us in shock.)

(Blackout.)

THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

(A faint whisper begins to echo around the stage in the darkness. The words are unintelligible. The whispers grow louder—still unintelligible... Then... A voice...)

JUDGE #1. *(O.S.:)* We find the accused...Guilty.

JUDGE #2. *(O.S.:)* Guilty.

(The word echoes across the stage.)

JUDGE #1. *(O.S.:)* The sentence...is Death.

JUDGE #2. *(O.S.:)* Death...

(Again the word echoes.)

(Dim lights come up on POE as he bolts awake. He glances around—confused. Lights slowly come up on SANTE, wearing a coarse wool robe, lying on the floor across the stage.)

(POE lifts his hand to examine it. SANTE unconsciously mirrors his gesture in silence.)

POE. Where am I? I'm unbound...

(POE reaches out a hand and slowly feels the floor—again SANTE makes the same silent movements.)

Damp and hard.

(Pause.)

Where am I? What if I am already dead?

(Lights fade down on POE. He exits, leaving SANTE alone. POE's voiceover carries Sante's thoughts through the following, as Sante lives the torture.)

(SANTE glances around furtively, turning his head—gasping for breath...)

POE. *(O.S.:)* All dark. Eternal night—Death. But I'm not dead. So where am I? In a dungeon waiting for my own murder? How long do I have to wait? Days? Months? No. The guilty die quickly. So where am I??

(SANTE stands and begins feeling around for something—anything—trembling, reaching out and up... But not moving a step.)

(Then finally he steps forward—arms extended—into the dark, squinting for what light there is...)

(Several steps into the emptiness... His breathing is a little easier.)

The dungeons. I always thought they were fables...just ghost stories...but now...At least I'm not buried alive in some coffin. I've heard a thousand rumors about what they do to you. I know I'm going to die. But how? And when? That's the question.

(SANTE lunges forward and smashes his hand into a wall.)

Alright. A wall. Smooth stone...slimy...and cold. But how large?

(SANTE reaches carefully for its parameters, but finds none.)

I've got to find out how big this dungeon is.

(He takes a few tentative steps forward...)

The floor is solid. Though slick with some kind of slime...

(He gets bolder—taking firmer steps...)

Yes...here we...

(He slips and falls on his face. And his voice echoes hollowly into a deep hole. He freezes.)

(Then puts forward an arm and waves it...)

SANTE. A pit.

POE. *(O.S.:)* A circular pit. Is this how I'm supposed to die?

(SANTE fishes for a pebble and drops it into the "pit." We hear it echo as it bounces down the well for many seconds...)

(Then a loud echo as it splashes into water.)

(A quick "click" from above—the overhead light flashes on for an instant, then clicks off.)

(SANTE looks up to where the light was.)

POE. A door in the ceiling? Were you watching to see if I'd fall?

SANTE. (*Shouting to the ceiling:*) Are you still watching? Well, I'll die here of starvation before I throw myself into your pit!

(He is trembling slightly, groping his way back for the wall. He finds it and curls back in against it.)

POE. (*O.S.:*) And even if I did throw myself in, I've heard that you don't die suddenly. What lies at the bottom?

SANTE. (*To the ceiling:*) What lies at the bottom??

(He curls in on himself. A loaf of bread and cup of water appear beside him. He looks around...

Then grabs the food up eagerly...

And freezes.)

No. No...

POE. (*O.S.:*) The bread.

SANTE. (*Clutching his stomach:*) What have you done to the bread...

(HE collapses.

Blackout. Pause.

Then the dim lights come up on...)

(SANTE—now on a low wooden platform, strapped down by a single rope wrapped repeatedly around him.

A small bowl of meat sits beside his left hand on the floor. He raises his head and looks around.)

POE. (*O.S.:*) Light. It's small. The cell is smaller than I thought. And the walls aren't stone...but some metal. Iron? In huge plates. But the floor is stone. I was right about one thing. And there in the center—the pit. ...And a bowl of meat.

(SANTE tries to move and discovers his left arm is free from the mid-wrist down.)

(He manages to reach the bowl and take a small helping of the meat. He eats it—and immediately tries to spit it out.)

POE. (*O.S.:*) Salt! Too salty! And of course, no water. Of course...

(*SANTE glares up.*)

The ceiling. Thirty or forty feet up. Made of iron as well. And right above me...a painting of Father Time—in a cloak...holding a pendulum. Like the ones in antique clocks. Huh.

(*SANTE looks down and then immediately back up.*)

Wait. Did the pendulum just move? Is the painting moving? ...yes. The pendulum held by Time...is swinging...swinging back and forth...back...and...forth...but why should it...

(*There is a skittering sound across the floor. SANTE turns immediately to twist and look down. The skittering grows louder...*)

Rats. Enormous rats...climbing out of the pit...three...four, five, whole troops of them...so fast...they smell the meat...they smell me...

SANTE. No...No!!

(*He thrashes as much as he can—yelling out...
The skittering ceases.*)

POE. (*O.S.:*) So this is how I'm going to die. Eaten alive by rats.

(*SANTE glances up.*)

How long has it been? Half-an-hour? Or an hour? But the pendulum...it seems to be sweeping much wider...and faster...

SANTE. Oh no...

POE. (*O.S.:*) And it's descending. There's my death. The pendulum's edge is a thin crescent blade of steel. About a foot long from tip to tip. Like a giant razor blade...swinging closer...and closer...to me. Weighted down with brass...swinging...slowly...so slowly...but it's coming...coming...

(*We hear the first "Hiss...Hiss" of the pendulum swinging through the air. We never see the blade.
But its "hiss" will grow gradually louder...
And louder...*)

Ingenious. Utterly...ingenious. So I escape the pit only to be destroyed by the pendulum.

(The skittering rats are heard again.)

SANTE turns to look at them—moves his hand to scare them away.

The sound fades back.

SANTE looks back up.

The hissing grows louder...)

POE. *(O.S.:)* Days pass. Maybe many days. I don't know. Hour after hour. Counting the rushing passes of the steel. Inch by inch...

(The hissing grows slightly louder...)

Line by line...down... and still down it comes...

(The hissing grows louder...)

I can actually smell it. The acrid stench of death.

(Hiss...Hiss...)

SANTE. *(Almost laughing:)* Please.

(He begins struggling.)

POE. *(O.S.:)* Please let it fall faster. End it now, but do it quickly. I can't take this...

SANTE. Please.

POE. *(O.S.:)* Down...steadily down...come on. Finish me.

SANTE. Finish me!!

(Then SANTE collapses back into stillness—exhausted.)

POE. *(O.S.:)* Just let it be over. Inch...by...inch...

(SANTE almost smiles at it...)

Inch...by...inch...

(Hiss...Hiss...)

Wait. Wait, wait, wait... The pendulum is swinging at a right angle to my body...it's going to cut across my chest and heart. But it's going to cut through my robe before it gets to me—there's a way out here...if I can just think clearly...

(Hiss...hiss...)

Down...steadily down it comes...so close to my chest...down...

(SANTE struggles violently to free his left hand...)

If I can break the rope on my left arm—I can seize the pendulum and stop it...

(SANTE fails to break the rope, falls back and lies still.)

(Hiss...hiss...)

POE. *(O.S.:)* Down. Still down.

(SANTE shrinks back.)

Ten...twelve passes and it will be on me...on my robe...on the cord tying me down. Wait. That's it. The cord tying me is one long piece of rope—not separate pieces...which means the first stroke of razor across any part of the rope will slice it so I can unwind it with my left hand! Yes! That's it! But by then the steel will be so close... The slightest struggle and I'm ripped open...

(SANTE stretches his neck to look at the rope.)

...No. They've already thought of that. I'm tied in all directions...except across the chest. Of course.

(SANTE drops his head back.

Hiss...Hiss...

Growing louder...)

(The scurrying rats are heard again.

SANTE looks around...)

The floor's swarming with rats—wild, ravenous—red eyes glowing—just waiting...for me to lie still...and become their meal. Wait a minute...the food. The food!

(Hiss...Hiss...The rats get louder...)

...if I smear the meat on the rope...

(SANTE quickly smears what little oily bits of meat he can across the ropes he can reach.)

This may work.

SANTE. Please. Let this work.

(And SANTE closes his eyes and goes completely still.

There is a pause in the rat's sounds...

Then a horrifying screeching and clawing as they move in on him...)

POE. *(O.S.:)* One jumps. Sniffing...two, three, all of them...

(The scurrying grows louder, oozing over him...)

...the well... slimy... claws... leaping... climbing... pressing...
swarming... my throat... cold lips... I can't... all over... all over...

(The scuttling and screeching are almost deafening...)

The rope! The rope!! They've eaten through the rope...but the pendulum...my clothes...my skin...

(The hissing is deafening...)

(Then with a scream, SANTE rolls off the rack. The hiss continues...)

SANTE. Free! I'm free!! *(Laughing in a crazed scream:)* Free free free free free!!!

(Click. The hissing stops. Silence. SANTE watches the pendulum stop... Then be drawn back up into the ceiling.)

So you could stop it at any time? And pull it back to you? Evil. Evil, evil, evil. *(Shouting at the ceiling:)* Hah? So you can still see me? Watching my every move? Well, see this? I'm free!!

(SANTE calms down and looks at all the walls—afraid to move.)

POE. *(O.S.:)* Wait. Something...has changed. The room...what is it? Where has the light been coming from? These cracks...beneath the walls.

(SANTE moves toward the base of one of the walls—slowly... Slowly...)

The walls are completely separated from the floor...so what...is behind...the wall...

(SANTE is kneeling... Peeks through the crack... Breathless... Waiting... Then he bolts upright.)

Nothing. I can see nothing.

(SANTE quickly stands and looks around.)

But the room. Something has changed.

(And now we can see a dull red glow coming from each of the walls—as if they're heating up...)

(SANTE gingerly touches a wall and pulls his hand back fast.)

POE. *(O.S.:)* Hot metal. That glow...they're heating the metal walls. The smell...

(SANTE chokes, gasping—stumbling toward the center of the cell... And the pit...)

SANTE. So this is how you kill me?

POE. *(O.S.:)* It's so hot...I'll be burned alive...unless...the well!

(SANTE races to the edge of the pit and looks in...)

I can almost see what lays in the pit...but it's not...it's impossible...how can they...

SANTE. No...no! Anything but that!

(SANTE yells out and tumbles back from the edge—burying his head in his hands.)

POE. *(O.S.:)* But the heat... I can't breathe... I can't... the walls. The walls are closing in!!

(A low rumbling sound is heard and we can see two of the walls closing in on either side of SANTE...)

SANTE. White hot iron...closing in... Please...yes, death...

POE. *(O.S.:)* Any death but what lies in the bottom of the pit!

(SANTE watches the walls—gasping for breath...)

(The rumbling grows louder... The walls are moving in... Forcing SANTE backward toward the pit...)

...nowhere to climb...they're coming in too rapidly to think...I cannot...the heat...and the pit...the merciless pit...

(The walls have him pressed to the edge now...)

*He tries not to touch the white-hot metal...
But is still getting burned...
He's writhing...)*

Not an inch...of foothold left...this is the end...no...

SANTE. NOOOO!!!

*(SANTE lets out a long scream of despair—about to topple forward...
The rumbling echoes across the stage...
Then we hear bugles—voices in the distance...
The wall is retreating...)
(The rumbling growing fainter as the bugles get louder...)
(And a SOLDIER's voice—possibly Poe's— calls out...)*

SOLDIER. *(O.S.:)* I've got one in here! He's still alive! We've rescued the city. You're free.

(SANTE seems to hover in space—one arm outstretched—a harsh white light flooding over him as he dangles above the pit...a grin inches over his face...)

SANTE. Free...free...free...

(The trumpets continue as the lights fade to black... Silence... And then in the darkness we hear...)

(One final "hiss" of the pendulum swinging overhead.)

THE TELL-TALE HEART

(Lights come up on POE, standing alone in the darkness. He's barely holding it together. Behind him we can see the rest of the stage—right now we are in a nice living room.)

(The OLD MAN enters wearing an expensive bathrobe, feeling around in his pockets for something. We can only see his right profile at the moment.)

OLD MAN. Good morning, Edgar.

POE. Good morning, sir.

OLD MAN. How did you sleep? Have you seen my slippers?

POE. Very well, sir. No, sir, but I doubt you'll find them in your pocket, sir.

OLD MAN. I'm looking for my pipe, lad, my pipe.

POE. Ah. Perhaps it's in your parlor, sir.

OLD MAN. No, no. I left my slippers down here at the foot of the stairs yesterday evening. I clearly remember.

(POE holds up the slippers.)

POE. And here they are, sir!

OLD MAN. My slippers? I don't need my slippers. I'm looking for my pipe, lad, my pipe.

(The OLD MAN pats POE on the shoulder and continues fussing around, mumbling to himself. POE turns to the audience.)

POE. It's impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. There was no reason for it. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire...

(The OLD MAN holds up his pipe triumphantly.)

OLD MAN. Here it is! In my pocket as I clearly remembered!

(He turns to face POE, and we now see his left eye. POE freezes staring at the eye.)

What? What is it, Edgar? What are you staring at?

(POE turns back to the audience.)

POE. I think it was his eye. Yes. Yes, it was definitely his left eye. It resembled that of a vulture's. Pale blue, with a film over it. Whenever it fell on me, my blood ran cold...

OLD MAN. Where's my breakfast?

POE. And so by degrees...

OLD MAN. Edgar, did you hear me?

POE. Very gradually...

OLD MAN. I'd like my breakfast now, if you please.

POE. ...I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

OLD MAN. Edgar!

(POE turns to him.)

POE. Will eggs be acceptable?

OLD MAN. Eggs would be splendid. But over-easy. And not runny.

POE. No, sir.

OLD MAN. When the egg yolk oozes out, slimy yellow liquid dribbling around and over my toast, dripping globs from my plate...

POE. Say no more, sir, say no more. Your eggs are on their way.

OLD MAN. And don't burn the toast.

POE. No, sir.

OLD MAN. Have you seen my slippers?

POE. *(To audience:)* Now this is the point. You call me mad. But madmen know nothing. They have no strategies—are incapable of conceiving plans and stepping carefully...but not I.

(Grabs up a tray and hands it to the OLD MAN.)

Your breakfast, sir. And your slippers. And your pipe.

(Sweeps the OLD MAN into a chair and bustles around him.)

And the daily newspaper. And a cup of tea. Green, from China, as you like it—no sugar...

OLD MAN. Edgar...

POE. And a candle, should the morning light begin to dim...

OLD MAN. I say, Edgar...

POE. And a little fresh air for your lungs—can't be too careful with the oxygen one needs to breathe...

OLD MAN. Really, Edgar...

POE. And should the shade of the rug offend your eye...eyes, that is—I can easily...

OLD MAN. Edgar!!

POE. Yes, sir?

OLD MAN. Have you no other errands to attend to? Don't you have a life?

POE. Ah. Yes. Quite. A life. Yes, sir.

(To the audience:)

Do you see my caution? My foresight? My sanity? I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week while I planned to kill him.

(The OLD MAN stands and heads back for his bedroom. POE turns to him.)

Ready to retire for the evening, sir?

OLD MAN. Yes, just about.

POE. The evening clock did strike ten a moment ago.

OLD MAN. I didn't hear anything.

(POE shepherds him off.)

POE. Good night, sir. See you in the morning, sir.

(The OLD MAN leaves, then is seen entering his bedroom, closing the door behind him, and lying down in bed.

He pulls the covers around him.)

POE: *(CONT'D.)*

...and don't forget...your slippers...

(POE turns to the audience and grins. Lights dim. He moves to the bedroom. It is fairly dark. All is still. Then we hear the faint sound of the latch on the OLD MAN's door turn and open.

The door opens slowly...

Very slowly.

About ten inches.)

(Then a hand creeps through holding a darkened lantern with the shutters closed...

And then POE slowly—very slowly—pokes his head in and looks around.)

POE. *(Almost whispered:)* It usually took me about an hour to place my whole head through the doorway. And I never woke him. Ha! Would a madman be so wise as this? So careful?

(POE undoes the lantern shutter carefully—very carefully—and opens the shutter to let the light shine out.

Just a single thin ray—shining onto the “vulture” eye. But the eye is closed or covered.)

Drat. I cannot do the deed unless I see the eye. It is the eye that vexes me, not the old man, but his Evil Eye. I can't kill him now.

(He slowly retreats from the room and closes the door. Just then the lights come up, a rooster crows, and the OLD MAN sits up—startled. POE throws open the door and enters boisterously.)

POE. Good morning, sir! How did you sleep? It's a beautiful dawn out there today, sir, golden sunrise!

(He pulls the OLD MAN out of bed during the following, and leads him through a frenzied day in the course of two minutes.)

Your slippers, sir. And your pipe—found it in your pocket, eggs are on their way—not runny—over easy, beautiful eggs, perfect toast—no charred crusts here, sir, oh no—your nice cushioned chair—here you are—upon which to rest—the daily paper, sir—read up, check the obituaries and weather reports—it’s a beautiful gorgeous day out there today, sir—cup of tea? China green, you like that, right? Beautiful China—no sugar—and your candle should the morning life begin to dim, morning light begin to dim—and a little fresh air for your lungs—can’t be too careful with the oxygen one needs to breathe to stay alive, and there’s the rug, not offending your eye, and egad! Look at the time! Ten P.M. already. Time for bed, sir, did you hear the clock chime? I did. Goodnight, sir, see you in the morning, sir, don’t forget your slippers, sir!

(And the OLD MAN is back in bed under the covers. A little perplexed, but drifting back to sleep. The lights dim.)

POE gives the audience a look and moves for the bedroom door.

Again he inches it open, again puts the lantern in, again sticks his head in, again opens the latch, shines the light on the vulture eye...

But it is, again, closed or covered.

POE grimaces and pulls the door closed.

The lights come up. A rooster crows.)

(The OLD MAN sits up, and POE throws open the door.)

POE. Good morning, sir! How did you sleep?

(Pause. POE drops his facade and approaches the audience.)

This went on for a week. Seven straight days. But each night I came to kill him...I found I couldn’t. For the eye—that cursed eye—was not open. And each following day, I was bold and kind and presented my best face. So you see, he would have been a profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept. But then arrived the eighth night...

(POE goes back to the door and slowly opens it once more.)

I am more than usually cautious in opening the door...a watch’s minute hand moves more quickly than mine does...

(He lets out a little chuckle. The OLD MAN stirs, but POE keeps moving—giddy with confidence.)

Steady...steady...

(POE's head and lantern are in the room...he's barely keeping it together...)

...now...just open the lantern...

(His hand hits against the lantern and makes a slight sound. The OLD MAN bolts upright in his bed.)

OLD MAN. Who's there??

(POE freezes. Long, long moments pass in absolute stillness... Both men are terrified... Then POE turns to the audience...)

POE. *(Whispered:)* For a whole hour I kept still and said nothing. Didn't move a muscle. But he won't lie back down. He just sits there...listening...just as I do, night after night, listening to the ticking clocks on the walls...and waiting...

(The OLD MAN lets out a dull frightened moan and pulls back onto his bed, curling in on himself...)

Ah. I know that sound. I know what the old man feels. And I pity him.

(Almost laughs.)

He's been lying awake ever since my first slight noise. And his fears have been growing and growing. He's been trying to imagine them causeless. But he can't. He's been saying to himself, "It was nothing but the wind in the chimney...it was only a mouse crossing the floor," or "it was merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Oh, yes, he's been trying to comfort himself with these excuses, but all in vain. All in vain.

(Working himself back up to being almost giddy again:)

Because Death, in approaching him, has stalked with its dark shadow before it, and it has covered its victim. And now he is terrified...

(Pause. POE pulls himself back together.)

Then he slowly—very slowly—opens the shutter of the lantern...A single dim ray shoots out and lights up the OLD MAN's staring "vulture eye" in all its glory.)

(A faint rhythmic beating is heard...)

The dull thumping of a heartbeat.

POE shudders—frozen...Then...)

POE. I'm not mad...but that's when I began to hear it. Can't you? The beating of the old man's heart...

(Whispers furiously at the OLD MAN:)

Stop it! Stop it!!

(The heartbeat increases...louder...)

(Whispered:)

Do you hear me??

(The heartbeat increases—even louder...)

Stop...it...

(The heart is pounding wildly...Furiously...)

The neighbors...the neighbors will hear your heart...your...

(The heartbeat is deafening—echoing wildly around the stage...)

Aaaggghhhhhh!!!

(He screams out and leaps for the OLD MAN—dropping the lantern...The OLD MAN yells out as POE grabs him and drags him off the bed...)

The heartbeat is booming off the walls...

POE throws the OLD MAN behind one of the paper walls—now illuminated from behind by the discarded lantern...

The heartbeat is racing...

Pounding...

We see POE and the OLD MAN's silhouettes—POE grabs the OLD MAN by the neck—the OLD MAN barely struggles—POE is strangling him—the heartbeat pounding, racing...)

(Then the OLD MAN goes limp and the heartbeat grows quieter—but still beating.)

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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