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Dramatic Publishing

Edgar Allan Poe's

The Tell-Tale Heart

dramatized by

Luella E. McMahon

THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



The Tell-Tale Heart

Drama. Based on the story by Edgar Allan Poe. Dramatized by Luella McMahon.

Cast: 5 or 6m., or 4m., 2w., variable.

A young man plans and commits the “perfect crime.” When a detective stops by on a quite different matter, it becomes apparent that the young man has little to fear. The only trouble is—he can’t stop the pounding of the dead man’s heart. Why can’t the detective hear it? As the pounding grows louder and the tension increases, the audience realizes that they are watching the very madness of a murderer. *One int. set.*

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A Play in One Act

The Tell-Tale Heart

Dramatized by

LUELLA E. McMAHON

from the story by

EDGAR ALLAN POE



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(THE TELL-TALE HEART)

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THE TELL-TALE HEART

A Play in One Act

For Six Men
(or 3 to 5 men and 1 to 3 women)*

CHARACTERS

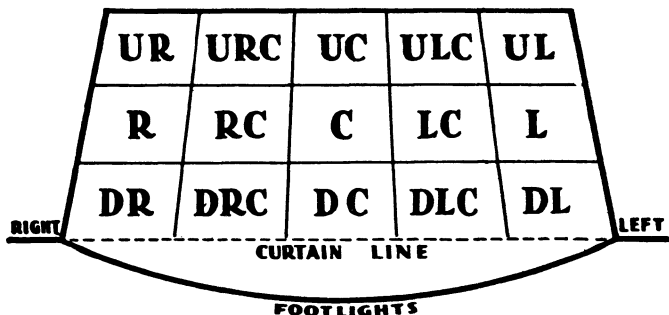
MAN
NEIGHBOR
WIFE
VISITOR
OFFICER ONE
OFFICER TWO
ROOMER

PLACE: The drab, scantily furnished living room
of the Man.

TIME: From 10:00 P. M. one evening to 4:00 A. M.
the following morning of a foreboding fall night.

* If a mixed cast is desired, the two neighbors visiting the Man at the beginning of the play may be women. The Visitor may be a man or woman. If an all-male cast is preferred, the two neighbors may both be men.

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

The Tell-Tale Heart

SCENE: The living room of the Man's home. At L there is an exit into the kitchen and the Man's bedroom beyond the kitchen. At R is an exit leading into the bedroom of the roomer (an old man). The exit to the outdoors is UC. [Since this play requires only a very free form of staging, practical doors are unnecessary. The characters leave and enter through curtain openings.] There are three straight chairs in the drab room. Besides the chairs, there is a table which holds several cups and saucers. UL, there is a stool or level which may be used for the "Visitor." [Note: If it is impractical to have a level, it may be dispensed with, and the character may come in from the left. If the indicated spots are hard to obtain, the character may hold a large flashlight, hidden under his robe so that only the light shows. This light is trained on his face, its beam covered with a green gelatin.] Also at UL is a small table, with an unlighted lantern and match on it.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: It is ten o'clock on a gray fall evening. The NEIGHBOR and his WIFE, who have been calling on the MAN, are preparing to leave. They are seated around the table: WIFE, up; NEIGHBOR, right; MAN, left. They have just finished their tea. The MAN speaks. He seems very nervous.)

MAN. It was gracious of you to come.

NEIGHBOR. We've been concerned about you.

WIFE. We hadn't seen you for days.

MAN (getting a little excited). But there's nothing wrong. You didn't think there was anything wrong?

WIFE. Of course not--only a bachelor, living alone, except for that nice old man you befriended . . .

MAN. I'm fond of that old man. I was happy to give him a home.

NEIGHBOR. It's most generous, nonetheless.

WIFE. We know your income is so limited.

NEIGHBOR. And you're not able to work.

MAN. But I've been writing. My last article was sent back, alas--"The Psychology of Murder."

WIFE (shuddering). Murder! You write so much about murder.

MAN. It's an intriguing subject.

NEIGHBOR. You've sold none of these articles?

MAN (vehemently). The publishers! They think I'm not qualified to write about murder.

WIFE. Be thankful you aren't!

MAN. Perhaps, some day they'll change their minds. (The NEIGHBOR and his WIFE exchange a quick, startled look; then the WIFE speaks.)

WIFE. You don't look well. Have you seen a doctor?

NEIGHBOR. We think you should.

MAN (quickly). There is no need.

NEIGHBOR. A doctor might give you something to soothe your nerves.

MAN. Nerves! (Grows more excited.) You talk as though I were sick.

NEIGHBOR. We don't mean that. It's only . . .

MAN (breaking in excitedly). I know what you're hinting! Disease has sharpened my wits, not dulled them.

WIFE. That's true, but if you'd only rest, or go to a hospital . . .

MAN. Hospital! I have no need for a hospital.
(Starts.) Did you hear anything?

NEIGHBOR. No.

MAN. It was like a pounding. My sense of hearing is very strong; so are my other senses. I have no need for hospitals.

NEIGHBOR (soothingly). My wife meant no harm.

MAN (appeased). Of course not.

NEIGHBOR (after a beat). I suppose the old man has retired. He's told me how soundly he sleeps.

MAN (with a quick look toward bedroom). He's gone to the country for a few days. I miss him. I love that old man. (When the MAN mentions that the old man has gone to the country, the WIFE gives a quick start, then controls herself.)

WIFE (rising). It's getting late. We must be going.

MAN (rising). But you come so seldom.

NEIGHBOR (helping his wife into coat or wrap which was on the back of her chair). We'll make it sooner next time. (They start for exit UC.)

MAN. Oh, before you go, I'll get the bowl you brought the soup in. So kind of you.

WIFE (turning back). We were happy to bring it.

MAN. I'll be only a minute. (He goes into the kitchen, L.)

WIFE (looking toward the bedroom). I'm sure I saw that old man come in, and he didn't leave. Why would he say the old man went to the country?

NEIGHBOR. Probably thought we were prying. He's a little suspicious.

WIFE. I tell you he needs care. We should insist that he see a doctor.

NEIGHBOR. We're not going to get involved. You should never have sent that note to the police.

WIFE (shuddering) All those articles on murder!

NEIGHBOR. A pastime. Anyway, we're not getting involved. I hope the police never find out who sent that note.

WIFE. They have no way of finding out. It wasn't signed.

NEIGHBOR (hearing slight noise, offstage L).
Shh--he's coming.

(MAN enters from L with bowl.)

MAN. Your bowl. (He hands it to her.) And thank you again.

NEIGHBOR. Good night.

WIFE (as she goes). Take care of yourself.

MAN (suspiciously). Why do you say that?

NEIGHBOR. Only a good wish. Nothing more.

(They go out UC. The MAN stands at the exit UC for a few seconds, watching them leave; then he mumbles to himself.)

MAN. A madman! That's what they think. I'm only tired--so tired. (He goes to the roomer's door, listens a moment.) He's sound asleep. Why did they ask about him? I love the old man . . . only I'm tired--very tired. (He goes to the table, sits in the right chair, drops his head into his arms upon the table. The lights dim to darkness with just a spot on the MAN.)

(Then, slowly, a spot comes up on the VISITOR as he enters. In the distance, the town clock tolls twelve.)

The MAN wakens, looks up at the
VISITOR, almost as though in a trance.)

MAN. Who are you?

VISITOR. I am the voice of your real self.

MAN. My real self?

VISITOR. The plan you've had in your mind for
this long time. You understand.

MAN. No--no.

VISITOR. Every minute, day and night, since the
old man came to live with you, the plan--your
plan--has haunted you.

MAN. I love the old man.

VISITOR. That has nothing to do with your plan.

MAN. I have no reason to harm him.

VISITOR. You want to know, to know about mur-
der. And there is his eye.

MAN. Ah, yes, his eye.

VISITOR. That eye!

MAN. The eye of a vulture.

VISITOR. A vulture should be destroyed.

MAN. He has never harmed me.

VISITOR. While he lives you cannot be free of that
eye. For seven nights you have known that.
Seven nights you've opened his door.

MAN. I only meant . . .

VISITOR. Be very cautious this eighth night.

MAN. I have no reason. I have no desire for his
gold.

VISITOR. It's not for gold.

MAN. He trusts me.

VISITOR. Move cautiously. Don't rouse his sus-
picions.

MAN. The minute hand of a watch moves more
noisily than I.

VISITOR. It is midnight. You will open the door
little by little.

MAN (recoiling). No!

VISITOR. He does not suspect your secret thoughts.

MAN. But I have no reason--not really - - -

VISITOR. His eye! Have you forgotten his eye?

MAN. His eye disturbs me only when it is open.

VISITOR. You said, yourself, it is the eye of a vulture. A vulture must be destroyed.

MAN. I've never been so kind to the old man as I have this past week.

VISITOR (insistently). A pale blue eye with a film.

MAN (shuddering). It makes my blood run cold.

VISITOR. A dull blue eye and over it, a hideous veil.

MAN. It chills the very marrow of my bones.

VISITOR. The eye will open soon. The eye will be upon you.

MAN. It cannot be. The old man is fast asleep.

VISITOR. You do not listen when I warn you about the eye. You do not hear.

MAN. I listen. I hear. My hearing is very acute. I hear many things that others do not hear. When I listen at the door, I can even hear the beating of the old man's heart.

VISITOR. Then, listen. (The MAN listens intently. At the discretion of the director, there may be the faintest sound of a heart beat; or this may be indicated to be in the man's imagination.)

MAN. I hear. That steady beating drives me mad. That--and the eye.

VISITOR. Rid yourself of the eye.

MAN (piteously). I can't stand his eye.

VISITOR. Then quietly--softly--the lantern. Silence the heart forever. (The MAN rises, as though in a trance, gets the lantern from UL,

lights it. He sets it on table.)

MAN (to visitor). But I am not mad.

VISITOR (soothingly). No, you are very calm.

MAN (starting for old man's bedroom R, then pulling back). I will not do this deed.

VISITOR. Steadily--little by little. (The MAN starts for the room again; again he stops.)

MAN. He has done me no harm.

VISITOR. He will not see you. The room is black.

MAN. He keeps the shutters closed. (Laughs slightly.) He is afraid of robbers!

VISITOR. Noiselessly. (The MAN listens, then turns to the VISITOR in bewilderment.)

MAN. Don't you hear it?

VISITOR. Hear what?

MAN. His heart. I think it's going to burst.

VISITOR. Silence it. (Points to door.) Soundlessly. (The MAN advances a few steps, turns again.)

MAN. If the eye is not open, I cannot. I have no other reason.

VISITOR (with imperious gesture). Go! (The MAN opens the door slowly, but there is a slight creak of the hinge. The old roomer gives a startled cry.)

ROOMER (off R in bedroom). Who's there? (The MAN draws quickly back into the living room.)

MAN. He heard.

VISITOR. Be quiet. He will think it is nothing but the wind.

ROOMER (offstage). Did I hear something?

MAN (pitily). He's frightened.

ROOMER (after another short pause). Is someone there?

VISITOR (as MAN starts to answer). Don't answer! He will think it's a cricket.

MAN. I pity him.

VISITOR. The eye! (The MAN starts toward the bedroom again.)

ROOMER (offstage, as MAN opens the door).

Who--who---- (Ends in a moan of fright.)

MAN (turning back). I cannot.

VISITOR. The eye!

MAN. His heart! The beating of his heart becomes stronger.

VISITOR. Move cautiously. (The MAN goes softly off R. The VISITOR disappears. There is a piercing scream from the bedroom.)

(The MAN comes from the bedroom R, looking intently at his extended hands. He moves, mechanically, to the table and sits, slowly staring at his arms stretched out on the table. Then, again slowly, he blows out the lantern and puts his head down on the table. The lights dim, then after a few seconds' pause, a distant clock is heard to strike four times.)

MAN. Four o'clock and still dark as midnight.

(He lights the lantern.) My breakfast tea.

(Goes into kitchen, L.)

(As the MAN leaves, a lantern or other light shines in through the window. If there is no window, the light may play on the curtain upstage. After another short pause, there is a sharp rap on the door. The MAN comes back, stands at the kitchen door, frozen in fright. In a moment, there is another sharp rap, followed by a command.)

OFFICER ONE (outside). Open up! In the name of the law. It's the police. (The MAN hesitates, looks toward bedroom, then speaks with assurance.)

MAN. What have I to fear? (Goes resolutely to door, opens it.)

(Two OFFICERS enter.)

OFFICER ONE. Good morning.

MAN. You're early callers.

OFFICER TWO. We saw your light.

MAN. I had trouble sleeping. I was preparing my breakfast tea. And you?

OFFICER ONE. We're checking the area.

MAN. Checking the area?

OFFICER TWO. During the night a scream was heard.

OFFICER ONE. By one of your neighbors.

OFFICER TWO. As though someone was calling for help.

OFFICER ONE. Somewhere in this vicinity.

OFFICER TWO. We have been ordered to search all premises.

OFFICER ONE. Merely a routine procedure.

MAN. You are free to search. (Speaks with assurance.)

OFFICER ONE. Thank you.

OFFICER TWO. The shriek was reported to be most piercing.

MAN. The shriek was mine--I had a dream.

OFFICER TWO. A nightmare?

MAN (eagerly). Yes--a nightmare.

OFFICER ONE. That sounds logical----

OFFICER TWO. Yes, it does--a nightmare--a sudden scream. (The OFFICERS look around, apparently satisfied.)

MAN (with growing confidence). Would you like to search the kitchen--and the bedroom beyond? (Indicates L.)

OFFICER TWO. Thank you. (They go out L.)

MAN (calling to them). Then come back and rest. You shall see that I can be a good host even at this hour. (The MAN arranges the chairs, cups on table, etc.)

(The OFFICERS return after a few seconds.)

MAN. Are you satisfied?

OFFICER TWO. Yes, everything is in order.

OFFICER ONE. Is there anyone in the house with you?

MAN. There is only a roomer.

OFFICER TWO. A roomer?

MAN. An old man--a charity case--I took in out of kindness. But he has gone to the country.

OFFICER ONE. May we see his room?

MAN (going to bedroom door, R). In here. You'll see his room is undisturbed. (OFFICER TWO goes into the bedroom; OFFICER ONE remains.)

OFFICER ONE. The water for your tea is already boiling on the kitchen stove. You do eat early.

MAN. As I said, I had trouble sleeping.

OFFICER. After the nightmare?

MAN. I'll brew tea for you gentlemen. (Goes L into kitchen. OFFICER ONE goes quickly to bedroom door, speaks softly.)

OFFICER ONE. Did you find anything?

(OFFICER TWO returns from bedroom R.)

OFFICER TWO. Not yet.

OFFICER ONE. Maybe it was only a crank note?

OFFICER TWO. It's the second one we've had.

OFFICER ONE. He didn't deny the scream.

OFFICER TWO. He's hiding something.

OFFICER ONE. If we give him time, he'll break.

OFFICER TWO. He'll be coming back any second.

(OFFICER TWO goes back into the bedroom,
OFFICER ONE picks up a cup, pretends to be
examining it. In a few seconds, the MAN
re-enters with the teapot, which he places on
the table. _

OFFICER ONE. This is a rare piece of china.

MAN. A friend sent it from Japan. (Goes to bed-
room door.) Do you find all things to your
liking?

OFFICER TWO (off R). Your roomer is a neat
housekeeper.

MAN. Come. You shall see how hospitable I
can be.

(OFFICER TWO comes from the bed-
room, R.)

OFFICER TWO. Thank you.

MAN. Won't you sit down? You must be tired.

OFFICER ONE. I am. (Sits.)

MAN. Then have a cup of tea to warm you.

OFFICER TWO (as he sits). Thank you. It's
been a long night. (During the following dia-
logue, the MAN pours the tea and serves each.

MAN. This weather chills one to the bone.

OFFICER TWO. The tea is most welcome. (The
officers watch the MAN intently, but their tones
are commonplace and apparently unsuspecting.
The MAN begins, very gradually, to break.)