

It might have been half an hour, perhaps even an hour (for I could take but imperfect note of time), before I again cast my eye upward. What I then saw confounded and amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence, its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly descended. I now observed—with what horror it is needless to say—that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel.

"THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM"

is one of Edgar Allan Poe's best-known stories. It, and five others by different authors, make up the *Tales of Terror* that will be heard in ZB Sunday Showcase on September 29. The other stories are "The Signal Man," by Charles Dickens; "The Body Snatcher" and "Markheim," by Robert Louis Stevenson; "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce; and "What Was It?" by FitzJames O'Brien. They are read by Nelson Olmstead, well known in America as a radio actor and reader.

Supernatural stories have always fascinated their hearers. Perhaps our most primitive emotion is fear, with fear of the unknown as its oldest and strongest form. Why pleasure should come from fear-evoking stories is not certain, although perhaps Aristotle's dramatic theory of "catharsis through pity and terror" no doubt has much to do with it. Certainly the horror story has a long history of popularity.

The most important element in these stories is conviction. The reader must be made to feel that it could happen to *him*, if he is not very careful. In less sophisticated times, when so many natural phenomena were unexplained, the supernatural was part of daily life. Spirits play an important part in pagan literature. Down the centuries ghosts have appeared to warn and inform, from the shades in Homer's underworld to Hamlet's father. In scenes of gloom and misery, in dark and dismal landscapes, they have mourned and prophesied. Elizabethan tragedy is filled with the shades of the departed shouting revenge, and when the novel became a separate department of literature the ghosts moved in with the Gothic architecture.

Poe, with his scientific attitude to the human mind and the true nature and sources of terror, transformed the uncanny story. He made terror, pain and decay his themes and he set a new standard of realism in literary horror. Secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking the conventional chains were no longer sufficient to excite the readers. Since Poe's day the tale of mystery and imagination has



TALES OF TERROR

continued to hold its fascinated audience, though there has been a tendency for the macabre element these days to come from another world, or rise unbidden from man's other terrible creation, atomic energy.

But whatever the stimulus to terror and whatever our reason for seeking it, the reaction can only come if a certain atmosphere has been produced. There must be a hint that the ultimate horror is upon us, that those fixed laws of nature which are our only safeguards

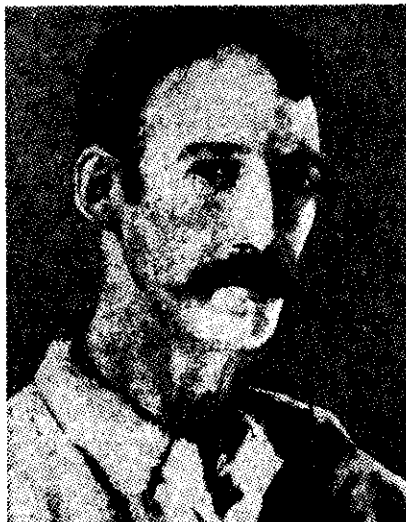
against the assaults of chaos have been suspended or defeated.

"The one test of the really weird," according to H. P. Lovecraft, "is whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim."

Black wings and the outside shapes may hold less terror for some of us. But if some have lost the medieval notions of heaven and hell, and with them the fear of ghosts and warlocks and things that go bang in the night, the known universe has come to be rimmed with a much vaster and vaguer region of the unknown around and within us. Dorothy Sayers thinks that our minds, or possibly our nerves, have become more sensitive.

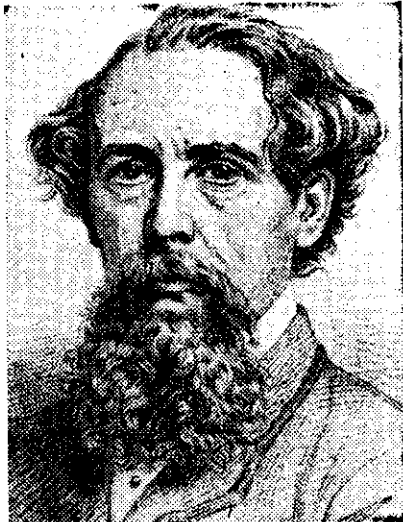
"We are afraid where no fear is. Our surface senses have hardened; what frightens us is the touch on the sleeve, the small voice in our ears: 'Are you quite sane? Are you sure you are quite sane? Is life quite sane? Are you sure—are you sure?' And you read, and you are not quite sure."

"It is not nice to feel insecure." The Victorians, comfortably aware of the essential security of their world, would not have been upset by any small voices. They liked their horror stories at full strength. Listeners to Sunday Showcase will hear examples in the best tradition of the Victorian horror story, from the mental tortures in Poe to the supernatural terrors of Stevenson. The best way to appreciate them would be to believe in the supernatural. If that is not possible, listeners might try to imitate the wittily truthful Madame du Deffand who, when asked "Do you believe in ghosts?" replied, "No, but I am afraid of them."



STEVENSON

"The Victorians liked their horror at full strength"



DICKENS

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