

RAVEN ABOUT POE by Peter Nuttall

EXCERPT

Scene 2 – Old Shop

(Spotlight on Gothic Character as it enters front of tabs carrying a sign saying ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’)

Narrator: The Tell-Tale Heart

(Gothic Character exits. Lights off. SFX. Faint sound of a heartbeat. Wilson enters front of tabs and is dimly lit. A red wash fades on and off now and then to accentuate parts of the dialogue, becoming more frequent as Wilson’s madness grows. Wilson sits on the floor and stares madly out into the audience.)

Wilson: **(Nervous and agitated)** How am I mad? I am nervous and this disease has heightened my senses. My hearing has become so acute. I can hear everything. I can hear it all; all in heaven and earth... and in hell. I heard many things in hell. So... how am I mad? **(He stands and moves slowly upstage, with a maddened stare fixed on the audience)** So how can I tell you my tale from that night and be so calm? Let me take you back to before it happened.

(The lights dim and the red wash matches the still faint heartbeat, flashing on and off a few times until the tabs open. Stage lights rise to reveal an old fashioned shop interior. An old man enters. He has a larger-than-normal weird-looking eye which must be obvious to the audience that it is different to his ‘normal’ eye.)

Old Man: Wilson my man, how are you on this fine day?

(Wilson continues to stare out into the audience as he speaks. The old man is oblivious to Wilson’s narration throughout and only reacts to his direct conversational dialogue)

Wilson: I don’t know why I thought it but when I did, there was no escaping it. There was no point to it; it was not driven by need. I loved the old man.

Old Man: Did you enjoy the broth I left for you on the stove? Does wonders on a cold day like this.

Wilson: **(To old man)** Yes, I did. Thank you.

Old Man: I have bought you a new coat. **(He fetches a coat from a table downstage)** That old one can't be doing you much good with the holes in the sleeves. **(He chuckles)**

Wilson: **(Smiling back weakly)** You're too kind.

(Wilson takes the coat and tries it on. The old man lies down on the bed stage left and begins to snooze. The lights dim and the red wash begins to pulse in time with the now slightly louder heartbeat.)

Wilson: **(To audience)** He had never wronged me. I think it was his eye. Yes, it was this. His pale blue vulture's eye that chilled my blood whenever it fell on me. I had taken the decision to rid the world of this eye; rid the world of this old man forever. To commit this deed I was never so clever, so cautious with such prudence.

(The lights dim a little further. Wilson exits stage right and re-enters carrying a dark-lantern out in front of him. The red light still pulsing with the heartbeat.)

Wilson: I was never kinder to the man for the whole week before I killed him. Every night, about midnight, I turned the latch on the door and opened it. So gently. I carried this dark-lantern; closed so that no light shone out. I entered the old man's room slowly so not to disturb his sleep. An hour I took to enter the room fully – would a madman have been as wise? I moved to his bed **(he does so)** and undid the lantern so a single ray of light fell on the vulture's eye.

(Wilson moves upstage to address the audience, the heartbeat a little louder now)

Wilson: This I did for seven nights; midnight, but the eye was always closed. Impossible to carry out the deed; the hellish deed. It was not the old man I hated but the eye. His *evil* eye. Then morning broke and I wandered boldly into his chamber.

(The lights rise fully. The heartbeat sound lowers in volume and the red light stops pulsing. Wilson hides the lantern behind his back. The old man awakens, rubs his eyes and sits up in bed; his feet on the floor to the side of the bed.)

Old Man: Wilson, you're here early today. Eager to get started I take it?

Wilson: I always spoke boldly, calling him by name and asking how his night had passed.

Old Man: Well, must get about my day. See you later.

(The old man exits stage right)

Wilson: **(Watching slyly as the old man leaves)** It was the eighth night that I carried out the deed. The eighth night of my desire to rid the world of the eye that did so haunt me. It finally allowed me power to carry out that which I had been compelled to do since that eye had started the hate. I waited all day for the man to return.

(The old man enters once more.)

Old Man: Wilson, how are you my man?

(Wilson hands him a cup from the table downstage)

Wilson: **(To audience)** I made him a night-time drink to see him off into his final dream.

Old Man: Cocoa. I shall sleep well after this.

(The old man drinks from the cup and climbs into bed. The lights dim, the heartbeat becomes audible once more and the red light begins to pulse as faintly as the heartbeat sound. Wilson moves stage right to enact that night's deeds.)

Wilson: My power was intense that night. I laughed at my feeling of triumph; that the old man could not even dream of my intentions. Had he heard me? He stirred but did I draw back? No! **(Wilson moves towards the bed)** The room black as pitch with the thick darkness and so I motioned to open the lantern but my thumb slipped. The clang of the tin fastening caused the old man to leap awake.

Old Man: **(Sitting up in bed but staring stage right, not at Wilson)** Who's there?

Wilson: I kept still; I did not move. For an entire hour I did not move.

(The old man stays upright in bed and Wilson waits)

Old Man: It is nothing but the wind in the chimney. It is only a mouse crossing the floor. It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.

Wilson: He had been trying to comfort himself but death had entered the room. I heard the groan; a groan of terror, mortal terror. I knew the sound, knew it well as the sound that rises from the pit of the soul. And now death approached with his black shadow before him though the old man did not feel *me* in his room.

(The heartbeat becomes a little more audible and the red pulses a little brighter)

Wilson: Though he had not lain down, I resolved to open the lantern. The width of a spider's thread I opened the lantern until the light fell upon the vulture's eye. It was open – *wide* open. I grew furious as I gazed upon it; the dull blue under the hideous veil chilled my bones. I saw nothing else, no man, no bed, no room. I had, by instinct it seems, focussed the light upon the evil eye.

(The heartbeat grows louder. Wilson turns and directs his manic stare out to the audience)

Wilson: Do you recall I said before, madness is but a heightening of the senses? To my ears a low, dull quick sound like the muffled tick of a watch. It was the beating of the old man's heart. Like a drum stirs a soldier into courage, so it stirred me to my deed.

(Wilson moves back to the bed)

Wilson: I remained still throughout the increasing thud.

(The heartbeat becomes louder still)

Wilson: It grew louder and louder; do you mark me well? I am nervous, at the dead hour of night in the dreadful silence it is strange that this sound excited and terrified me. The heart grew louder, so loud I thought it could burst – had his terror grown so? And then it occurred to me – the sound could be heard by a neighbour! The old man's time had come.

(Lights off)

Wilson: I struck. I dragged the old man beneath the bed, there he stayed.

(The old man yells as he is dragged from the bed. The heartbeat stops. He slips down behind the bed (and off stage if possible) so he remains unseen for the remainder of the scene. Lights up so they dimly light the stage.)

Wilson: (Staring into the audience from upstage centre) I smiled to find the deed so far done. My hand on the heart that pulsed no more – the eye would trouble me no more. You still would not call me mad when you discover that I concealed the old man, in parts; head, heart and all under three planks of the floor. I replaced the boards so cunningly that no eye, not even his, could have detected any wrongdoing.
(SFX. Knock on the door)

Wilson: After I'd hidden all trace of my deed, it was 4am. Still dark as midnight a knock came on the street door. I went to answer it with a light heart for what now did I have to fear?

(Wilson exits stage right to answer the door. He returns with three policemen.)

Policeman 1: (Removing his helmet and nodding) Good evening sir

(Wilson leads the Policemen centre stage)

Policeman 2: A neighbour heard a man call out

Policeman 3: Said it came from this house

Policeman 1: They had suspicions of foul play

Policeman 2: We are duty bound to search the premises Sir.

Wilson: (Calm and cheery) Firstly, Gentlemen – Welcome! The shriek that was heard was my own – from a dream. The old man is away presently, visiting the country.

Policeman 3: Be that so, we must still perform our search.

(The policemen begin to search the room)

Wilson: (To audience) I took the visitors all over the house and bade them search *well*. I showed them the old man's treasures, secure and undisturbed. In my enthusiasm I brought chairs to the room.

(Wilson brings chairs from downstage and places them around the area in front of the bed for the Policemen to sit. He collects another chair from downstage and places it between the other three right in front of the bed)

Wilson: In the wild audacity of my perfect triumph I placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which the old man's head, heart and all did lie.

(The policemen take their seats as does Wilson)

Policeman 1: Indeed, your dream must have been terrifying sir. We have found no evidence of anything other than that.

Policeman 2: (Conversationally) Did you hear of the new grocer in Butler street?

Policeman 1: I did not

Policeman 3: You must have, best turnips this side of Baltimore!

Policeman 1: I've always bought mine from Mr Tanner and I always will!

(The Policemen continue to stage-chat as Wilson addresses the audience)

Wilson: They sat, suspecting nothing, chatting familiar things. But I felt myself becoming pale and wished them gone. My head ached, my ears rang but they stayed chatting. The ringing –

(The heartbeat is heard once more and the red pulse returns faintly but both increase dramatically as the scene continues)

Wilson: The ringing – more distinct. I talked more freely **(he looks at the officers who are chatting and laughing)** to get rid of this sound but it grew and grew. It was soon plain that the sound was not in my head. More pale I grew and louder I spoke but the sound increased.

(The heartbeat is louder now. Still the officers sit and chat, oblivious to the sound)

Wilson: **(Loudly)** 'Ha ha', I laughed, but still I could not hide the sound. I talked more quickly, more vehemently, but the noise increased.

(The heartbeat is now at full volume and the red wash pulses at their brightest. The police officers continue to chat, oblivious as Wilson grows more and more panicked.)

Wilson: I stood and argued loudly about trivial things, gesticulating violently.

(Wilson gesticulates wildly then begins to pace the stage. The Police look on confused)

Wilson: Why would they not be gone? What *could* I do? **(to audience)** I foamed! I raved! I swore! I swung the chair on which I'd been sitting –

(Wilson scrapes the chair across the stage but still it does not cover the sound of the heartbeat. The policemen wait until Wilson stops dragging the chair and then go back to chatting to each other pleasantly)

Wilson: **(Flicking his gaze between the policemen with madness and confusion)**
The sound is *so* loud... is it possible they cannot hear it? No – they heard! They suspected! They *knew*!

(Wilson nears each Policeman and speaks almost directly into the ear of each in turn)

Wilson: They are making a mockery of my horror. This I thought and this I *still* think. Anything is better than this agony. Anything was more tolerable than this ridicule. I could bear those deceitful smiles no longer!

(Wilson stands upstage and yells into the audience with his final moment of madness. The beating and red pulses continue, more quickly.)

Wilson: I felt that I must scream or die! And – now – again – hear it! Louder! Louder! Louder! *Louder!* ‘Villains!’, I shrieked, ‘pretend no more! I admit the deed!’

(Wilson moves back to the spot where he sat, the place he buried the old man)

Wilson: Here! Tear up the planks. Here it is – **(He removes a floorboard or perhaps the lid of a box and takes out a heart. He holds it aloft in his hand)** I murdered the old man and here it is, the beating of his *hideous* heart!

(Lights off. The heartbeat continues with the red flashes until the final beat which should be a double beat (i.e. two quavers versus two crochets) and then silence. Tabs closed.)