

THE TELL-TALE HEART

ADAPTED FROM THE STORY OF E. A. POE

BY

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PERSONS OF THE PLAY

JACK ADAMS, *a youth (of some 30 years)*

MARTIN MEYER, *an old man (of some 60 years)*

CLARK, *a neighbour (of some 45 years)*

A POLICE SERGEANT *and* TWO CONSTABLES

COSTUMES: *Twenty years ago—the persons being just above working men in social condition*

PROPERTIES REQUIRED

Old-fashioned safe

Coppers for Jack

Bags of "treasure," objects d'art, etc., for safe and cache

Shutters and bars for windows

Glasses, etc., and drinks (in Cupboard)

Lantern, practicable dark

Grocers' Calendars and other suitable decorations

THE TELL-TALE HEART

The SCENE represents the interior of a cottage of some pretensions, though poorly furnished.

[*The CURTAIN rises—MARTIN knocks the ashes from his long churchwarden pipe on table J.—JACK sitting on table.*]

MARTIN. I think I'll go round to the Blue Cow, Jack, for my night-cap. [*Going, turns: hand on JACK'S shoulder.*] I've been thinking, lad, we must all die, and them as is old thinks a mort about it, Jack!—never fear. I've been thinking, lad, Jack Adams has been a son to me, and more than a son.

JACK. Why, no! Father, it's me that is glad you bid me call you so.

MARTIN. More than a son, and a kind, kind son, lad! Thinks I, I'll see Lawyer Brown to-morrow, and tie up my little bit so that no one shall touch it after me but my dear lad, Jack Adams.

JACK. No, no, Father! we'll talk o' that this twenty years hence. Will you take the lantern, Father? the nights are main dark.

MARTIN. Ay, lad, I will; [*turns away: JACK'S whole manner changes, and HE follows MARTIN with a furtive look of hate. MARTIN gets and lights lantern; when HE turns, JACK is again all smiles*]—and do you see to the shutters. I hear a-many tales o' robbers; twere not so when I were young, lad. The world gets worse as we get older, Jack.

JACK. Nonsense, Father, they won't attack us. Don't the village know how I half-choked the life [*HE makes a murderous gesture, so violent that the OLD MAN shrinks*] out of Bagstock, that was torturing the stray dog?

MARTIN. Ay, lad, and well it served the brute. I'm off now, Jack, you're a strong lad and a brave, but these nasty robbers have weapons, we must be careful, main careful.

JACK. Only one night-cap, Father!

MARTIN. Ay, lad—I'm thinking a drop ud do ye good now, Jack. A week and more ye've not been yourself altogether—though this I will say, never a kinder lad breathed than my dear lad, Jack Adams, this last week. Affliction purifies, ay, it purifies; if ye're out o' sorts yourself, why, you're kinder to others, makes ye lean on them, like—there's a blessing to everything, lad, depend on it, a blessing hidden in every mortal thing.

JACK. Never fear, Daddy Martin. I've slept ill lately, but I know I'll sleep sound to-night.

MARTIN. Ay, Jack. [*Exits L.*]

JACK. [*Makes quite sure that the door is shut, then comes to footlights. Sits on floor and laughs silently—then listens intently as if HE heard something—his surprise grows almost into fear then he starts laughing again—HE produces furtively a razor and runs his thumb cautiously along the edge—looks at the door and gnashes his teeth then his manner changes and he laughs openly and struts proudly about.*] What do I want with his money? I'm rich, rich, incalculably rich. Why, I've only to say the word and all the people would bow down to me. The richest man in the world! Think of it! I'll do wonderful things. I'll buy the Tower of London for poor old Martin, dear old boy. On my soul, I love him like a father. [*A pause.*] What was it now? I've forgotten—I knew a minute ago. However did the idea strike me? Such a beautiful idea. Aha! Aha! [*Manner again changes to intensely furtive hate inspired by horror.*] It is his eye—that pale blue filmy eye. It is like the eye of a vulture. My blood runs cold. I will cut it out; the blood will run warm all over me. I shall bathe in it. I shall never shiver again. Oh no! the blood of the old is bitter chill. But it shall not look at me, glazing over till it almost dies—I hate you, hate you, hate you! [*HE walks about.*] Seven nights—seven long nights! have I waited for my chance to stinguish its glare—in his blood—in his blood—in his blood! [*Stumbling over a shutter, HE recovers normal manner.*] Ah! the robbers, we must keep out the robbers. [*HE bars and shuts the windows, quite normally.*] Dear old

Daddy, to rob him they'd have to walk across me. [*Feels his muscle business.*] And now I'll get to bed.

[*Exits R.*]

[*Re-enter MARTIN., L., who locks and bolts the door most carefully after him.*]

MARTIN. Is it all right, lad? Are you gone to bed?

JACK. [*Off.*] Ay, ay, Father, all's well. Call if you need me.

MARTIN. Good-night, lad; God bless ye, Jack!

JACK. [*Off.*] Good-night, Father! and pleasant dreams.

[*MARTIN goes and tests all the fastenings of the shutters, bars and so on. Then goes to safe and brings out various precious pieces of silver and gold, china and the like HE fondles and admires these, puts them back, locks up, crosses to cache with utmost furtiveness, opens same, pulls out sacks of gold coin, plays with them.*]

MARTIN. They'll never discover old Martin Meyer's cache, I warrant. Oh, the beautiful gold! When I was a young man I was fond of the kisses of beautiful women; did ever a pair of lips touch me as softly as the soft bright gold? [*Laughs softly and gladly.*] How it trickles over my hands! Sweetest caresses ever I knew, and not a pennyweight rubbed off the beautiful minted money for it all. Ah! [*HE listens.*] Nothing! Nothing! But I mustn't be caught like this: old Martin Meyer must be very careful.

[*HE replaces the sacks, and closes the cache. Then goes to bed, undresses, gets in, adjusts a large night-cap, and puts out the lights.*]

[*Loudly.*] Good-night, Jack! the door's always open: if you hear robbers, run in, my lad, and serve em as you serve that brute of a Bagstock.

JACK. [*Off very sleepy.*] Good-night. All right, Father, never fear.

MARTIN. Good-night.

JACK. [*Off fainter.*] Goo'-nigh'!

[*MARTIN composes himself to sleep. A pause. Then the door slowly, slowly opens. Audience can see JACK crouching behind and pushing in with infinite caution*

HE carries a dark lantern. This goes on for a long while; at last he warily puts his head in, withdraws it, and again puts it in slightly advanced, with lantern forward. He is seen to be smiling grimly to himself. HE is half round the corner of the half-open door, and very warily puts out his right hand to open the ray of the lantern. HE stops repeatedly to listen during all this time. His thumb slips on the fastening of the lantern, and the latter swings against the door, making a startling clatter. MARTIN springs up in bed, crying loudly]—

MARTIN. Who's there?

[*A long pause; presently MARTIN gives a slight groan of abject terror. BOTH remain absolutely still. Another long pause. Then JACK again tries to open the lantern with infinite stealth; at last a single tiny dim ray shoots out and throws Martin's eye into startling brilliance. Another long pause, but JACK should endeavour without the slightest movement to let the audience guess that he hears something. At length, with a wild yell, he throws open the lanternfull light on stage and darts into the room. MARTIN shrieks once only and very loudly. JACK drags MARTIN to the floor, and pulls the heavy mattress over him, pressing it down with hideous laughter, though all the time he listens, as if to hear the beating of MARTIN'S heart. HE puts his ear to the mattress. At last, with a laugh of satisfaction, he removes the mattress and examines the corpse, ear to heart.*]

JACK. Dead. Stone dead. Stone dead. Stone dead.

[*HE looks around in France, MARTIN will have disappeared from under the bedding by a trap door and left a dummy. JACK will cut out the eyes of this dummy with his razor; they will bleed horribly. HE will make appropriate remarks but in England he simply looks round, then]—*

JACK. Now to conceal the body; aha! I have it. [*With a chisel HE lifts up the three planks and puts the body under the floor, replacing the planks. He smooths over the place, looks for and collects dust, and sprinkles it evenly over; re-makes bed, etc.*] Safe! safe for ever from that vulture eye of blue. Safe! [*A distant church clock strikes eleven.*] To bed! No more long watches to distract me. No more waiting to catch that evil, filmy eye, casting its vulture curses on me. How I shall sleep! shall sleep!

[*A loud knocking outside, L.—JACK startled—then with a look of infinite cunning HE smiles*]—Safe! safe! [*Goes to door, L.*]

A VOICE: [*Off muffled several half audible words ending "Meyer."*]

JACK. Old Meyer's gone into the country. [*With sudden alarm.*] Isn't he at the Blue Cow?

VOICE. [*Angrily and loudly.*] Open the door at once, or we must break it down. I don't wish to disturb you, Mr. Adams, but I think it's only right to say—

[*Confused voices interrupt. JACK undoes the bolts.*]

JACK. Certainly, certainly, neighbour, glad to see you. I was half asleep when you knocked, and woke up main cross, as the saying is. [*THEY file in.*] Why, sergeant, come in! What's happened now? Robbery? Not here, while I'm guardian. Remember Bagstock, sergeant? Ha! Ha! Ha! Come in, Warren; come in, Anderson; a cold night; we'll have a drop of something to warm us by and by.

[*More and more at his ease.*]

SERGEANT. Why, the fact is, Mr. Adams, neighbour Clark here heard a dreadful cry in the cottage, and—

JACK. Ha! Ha! Clark, you're a funny fellow. It's no joke to me, though, for the fact is I had the most awful dream—

SERGEANT. And so you shrieked, of course. Strikes me, neighbour Clark, you've found a pretty mare's nest.

CLARK. But where's old Meyer? I swear I saw him come in less than half an hour ago.

JACK. I tell you he's not here. Why don't you look for him, you dear old muddlehead?

SERGEANT. Why, yes, Mr. Adams, that seems the simplest way.

JACK. Just take a note first of all of what the burglars have done, Sergeant. Three large patent safes carried bodily away—shutters broken—[*Goes and rattles them*—Room in disorder—[*Pulls the bedclothes on to the floor*—Part of the swag lying on the floor—shows the burglars were disturbed in their nefarious occupation. [*HE scatters some coppers about.*] Murdered body of Meyer up the chimney—go and look, Clark, don't be scared, they did the job thoroughly—he won't bite you! My murdered body—where shall I hide my murdered body, eh? [*The POLICE roar with laughter, louder and louder, and CLARK looks more and more sheepish.*] Oh! you'll find that in my room, I should think: run along. [*HE pushes THEM through door, R.*] Sorry I can't help you look for it—I must get that ale.

[*Goes to cupboard and brings ale and glasses. Seeing himself alone, he whispers, Safe! Safe! dropping into the furtive, gleeful manner. Then suddenly HE seems to listen intently. All this time the others are heard off, talking and laughing. HE goes R, shuts door, goes to place where corpse is, listens with ear to floor. With great terror, rising to his knees.*]

JACK. It is—it is—low, slow, and solemn, but it *is*—again—again! God! Great God! they will hear! [*Voices louder, returning. JACK resumes his jolly manner and shuffles about, pouring out the ale.*]

[*Re-enter OTHERS.*]

JACK. Well, did you find it all as I said?

SERGEANT. Neighbour Clark, you'll not hear the last o' this for many a long year. [*Goes to table. Drinking bus.*]

1ST CONSTABLE. Burglars! ho! ho! ho!

2ND CONSTABLE. Murder! ha! ha! ha

SERGEANT. Here's to your health, Mr. Adams!

JACK. Yours, neighbour Clark; no offence, man, no offence. [*Aside*] Louder, louder! they will hear it.

CLARK. Well, I'm sure—

SERGEANT. Never be sure! The first great rule of a good officer.

JACK. What? What? I say no—[*louder*]—I say no! Know your own mind and stick to it. Let's have a song—ah, what do you say? "A policeman's life is not a happy one?"

SERGEANT. Why, it's no trouble; it's well worth coming across to talk to such a good fellow, and drink a glass of ale like this.

JACK. Have some more! Sing, somebody—Clark, you sing.

CLARK. Why, it's main late.

SERGEANT. Cheer up, neighbour Clark, we all make our mistakes.

JACK. [*Louder.*] I say no! I never make a mistake. I never—sing, I say!

SERGEANT. You sing, Mr. Adams, a lovely voice you've got. Give us the Harvest Song.

JACK. [*Still louder.*] There isn't a song. There isn't a harvest. It rained—rained—rained—tap—tap—

[*shouts.*] You're a liar. The sun shone, there wasn't a sound, not a sound.

[*THEY begin to look surprised.*]

CLARK. [*Aside to Sergeant.*] He's been a bit excited-like these last few days—and the ale's main good. Don't seem to notice him!

SERGEANT. [*Aside to CLARK.*] Right, very right, neighbour Clark.

[*JACK starts to sing, cannot remember the words, sings anything very loud shuffles the chair about, knocks it at last on floor with ever-increasing din. The OTHERS go on chatting and laughing. JACK at last exhausts himself. HE assumes his furtive suspicious manner they take no notice, but laugh even louder. JACK observes them keenly throws up his arms, rushes to SERGEANT and grips his shoulder, dragging him to G. shrieks.*]

JACK. Villains! dissemble no more! I admit the deed! tear up the planks! here! here! [*By G.*] It is the beating of his hideous heart!

CURTAIN.