

I opened my eyes. But I could not see anything. It was dark - completely dark. There was no light at all. Everything was black. I closed my eyes and opened them again. But I could see nothing. Where was I?

I was lying on my back. I was lying on something hard and cold. I reached out my hand and felt a stone floor. The stones were cold and damp. I was lying on my back in a stone room. Was I in a tomb? Was I in a place where dead bodies were buried? I had to move. I had to find out. I turned over onto my hands and knees. Then I started to crawl forwards. In a few seconds, I found a wall. It was cold and wet. Maybe I was in a room that was under the ground.

I followed the wall, very slowly. I thought that I was moving in a circle. I was not sure. Then I had an idea. I tore a piece of cloth from my shirt and put it on the floor, near the wall. Then I walked along the wall of the room.

I counted the number of times that I moved my hands forward. Twenty...thirty...forty times. Where was the piece of cloth? Had I gone past it in the dark? Had I gone around the room twice? I counted up to one hundred before I found the piece of cloth. But I did not find a dead body in a coffin. I was not in a tomb.

Where was I? I tried to remember. I remembered that I was in Toledo, in Spain. Then I remembered a courtroom and men in red gowns. They had asked questions-more and more questions. Their voices were soft and their eyes were bright. How many hours had they questioned me? How many days had they questioned me? I could not remember. The questions had gone on and on. But what was my crime?

What law had I broken? I did not know. I was very frightened. I thought that the questioners were going to torture me. But no one had cut me with sharp blades. No one had hit me. No one had burnt me with hot iron. Now I must be in a jail. This room was a prison cell. Maybe I would die here, without food, or water, or light.

I closed my eyes again and I must have slept.

When I awoke, I moved my foot and it hit something. I touched a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water. A jailer had come into my prison cell and left food and drink.

I knew that my prison cell was large. But what was in the center? For a few minutes, I sat with my back against the wall. Then I started to crawl straight ahead-across the floor of the cell. I moved very slowly. Suddenly, my hand went down and forward. I had found a hole-a pit in the floor. I could feel and smell damp air. The air was rising up from the pit. I guessed that the pit was very deep. I had almost fallen into it. My body shook with fear. My skin was covered with sweat. The drops of sweat fell from my face and down into the deep hole.

Suddenly, I heard a noise. A small door opened above my head and light shone down on me. For a few seconds, I saw my prison cell. Then the small door shut again and everything was dark and black. I was right! I was in a room with a deep pit in its center.

I understood now. My torturers had been waiting and watching. They wanted me to jump into the deep pit. They wanted me to end my life.

I slowly crawled back to the pitcher of water and the bread. My arms and legs were shaking. I was weak and tired. I took a piece of bread and started to eat. The bread tasted of salt. I quickly drank the water from the pitcher. Soon after this I felt very, very tired. I slept again.

When I awoke, the cell was not completely dark. I could just see its walls. The room was square. Each wall was about fifteen feet long. And the walls were not made of stone. They were made of metal. High in the center of the ceiling, there was a small door. Strange and terrible pictures were carved into the metal walls. The pictures were of evil spirits and monsters.

I was lying on my back but I could not get up. I was no longer lying on the stone floor. My body was tied to a wooden bed. A rope was tied around my chest, but I could move my arms. I reached out my hands and tried to find the pitcher of water. I was very thirsty.

There was no water, but I found a dish of meat. I put a piece of the meat into my mouth. No! I could not eat the meat! It tasted terrible. It was full of salt and strong spices. My jailers wanted me to be thirsty. This was a new torture.

I looked up at the ceiling. I could see a picture there. It was a picture of Time-an old man with a long beard. Pictures of Time always showed an old, bearded man with an hourglass in his hand. Hourglasses had two containers inside them. The containers were made of glass and they were joined in the center. One of the containers was filled with sand. When all the sand had run from one container to the other, an hour had passed.

Time also held a long, sharp scythe. Every living thing is killed by Time.

But in the picture on the ceiling, the blade of Time's scythe was not part of the painting. This blade was real, and it was sharp. It was made of metal and it hung down from the ceiling. The blade was like the pendulum of an old clock. As I watched, the pendulum started to move. It moved slowly, backward...and forward.

Suddenly I heard a noise beside me. It was the sound of many small animals running on hard ground. Then I heard high, sharp cries. Rats! There were rats here in the cell! They had climbed out of the pit!

Several large black rats ran across the floor toward my wooden bed. I moved my arms and shouted. I tried to frighten them away. The rats looked at me with their red eyes. They opened their mouths, and I saw their sharp, pointed teeth. Were the rats going to be my next torture ?

I looked up at the pendulum again. It was moving more quickly now. As it moved backward and forward, it made a soft whooshing sound. WHOOSH! The pendulum swung back behind my head, and I could not see it. Then it swung forward over my feet. WHOOSH! As I watched, I saw that the pendulum was lower. Very slowly, the pendulum was getting closer to me. Now I saw the reason for the pendulum. This was how I was going to die! The sharp blade of the pendulum was going to kill me. But it was not going to kill me quickly. It was going to cut my body very, very slowly. The pain would be terrible. How many times was the blade going to cut my body? How long was I going to lie on

the wooden bed? How many times was I going to scream, as my blood ran onto the floor?

One of the rats ran over my hand. I cried out and pulled my hand away quickly. The dish of meat was still beside me. The rats could smell the meat and they wanted it.

Suddenly I had an idea. I reached out my hand and took some of the meat from the dish. Then I rubbed the spiced meat onto the rope that was around my body. I nibbed the meat all along the rope. Then I lifted my hands above my head and lay still.

At first, the rats were frightened of me. They did not come too close. Then one of them jumped onto my chest. I did not move. I felt the rat's sharp little feet on my body. I saw its red eyes and sharp teeth. I tried not to scream.

The rat put its nose closer to the rope. It smelled the spiced meat on the rope. The rat started to bite the rope with its sharp teeth. It was eating the meat that was on the rope. Soon another rat jumped onto me. It started to eat the rope too.

More and more rats came. They ran over my face. They ran over my body. I kept my mouth and eyes closed. I tried not to shout in fear. I tried to stop my body shaking. The rats' feet and tails touched me. I felt the horrible animals on my mouth and my eyes and my nose. I heard their high, sharp cries.

The sound of the pendulum became louder. Soon, the whooshing sound of the pendulum was louder than the

sound of the rats. The blade was coming closer to my body. I felt the air move as the pendulum passed over my face.

The pendulum swung very wide. I counted each time that it passed over me. Six seconds...seven seconds-then the blade swung back. Six...seven...WHOOSH! Six...seven...WHOOSH! The pendulum swung lower and lower. It was now only a few inches above me. And it was moving more slowly.

The huge blade frightened the rats and they ran away. The animals knew that they were in danger. They had eaten part of the rope, but I was not yet free. I waited for the pendulum to cut the rope completely.

Seven seconds...eight seconds. The pendulum whooshed above my body from head to foot-and then from foot to head. Seven...eight...WHOOSH! It was very close to me now. I tried to make my body lower on the bed. Where was the blade of the pendulum going to bite me? Was it going to cut my head? Was it going to cut my chest or stomach? I screamed. The blade bit and it cut the rope! The pendulum swung toward my feet.

Suddenly I was free. I jumped from the wooden bed and lay on the floor. Sweat was pouring from my skin. I was breathing quickly. The pendulum whooshed past one more time, and then it stopped.

The small door in the ceiling was open. My torturers were watching. They had seen me escape from the blade. Suddenly, the pendulum moved up into the ceiling, and it was still.

I was not safe for long. A little later, I smelt something. It was not the smell of rats. And it was not the smell from the deep, dark pit. It was the smell of hot iron.

The metal walls of the cell were becoming hot! I moved closer to the pit. It was cooler here. This was my torturers' plan. They were heating the walls. When the cell became too hot, I must jump into the pit. The pit was cool and damp. But the cell walls were not only hot, they were also moving! The hot metal walls were moving toward me. The pictures of the evil spirits and monsters were now red. They were getting hotter. I was going to burn on the walls, or I was going to fall into the pit. I had very little time.

I stood on the edge of the pit and I closed my eyes. The walls were hot and the floor was hot. The air was hot! I felt the terrible heat on the skin of my face and hands. I was ready to fall. This was the end. I was going to die in this terrible place.

Suddenly, I heard voices. People were shouting. I heard the sounds of guns. People were fighting. Then I heard another sound. The walls were moving again.

What was happening now? I was weak and tired. My arms and legs were shaking. The walls were moving back, but it was too late. My clothes were starting to burn. I was about to fall. I was already falling...

Then someone held my arm and pulled me back. As I turned my head, I saw the person who was holding me. It was a soldier who was wearing the uniform of the French army. French soldiers had captured the city of Toledo. All the prisoners were free.