

## **I DO NOT SLEEP**

(A HOMAGE TO EDGAR ALLAN POE)

by VINCENT P. LEWIS

I do not sleep.

I shall tell you why. It is not that I never close my eyes and experience any rest. The needs of carnal human nature would long ago have confined me to the grave—that place of the final and fateful rest—had I not been able to steal, in most trivial portions, that rest which most men experience so habitually, yet with neither gratitude nor appreciation.

Yes, I sleep...for moments only. A few now, and then some more, hours later—this is all I can achieve. Oh, if only to rest, peacefully, for sequential hours—for an entire night! However, for one entire night—this I can not do.

My malady, if my incapacity is such, is due to no perceptible physical defect. There is no medical name for my dis-ease, for this word, meaning “the lack of ease,” is my precise condition. I know its cause. It is due to my dream. It

the same one that precludes me from the comfort all other men are given. I ask: which other man, who is tormented by such a dream, could long be embraced by sweet sleep?

I seek rest with my whole heart—yes, with my whole being—yet I, with that part of my brain that fears, will fight against this most natural state. I reject that which I most desire.

My fate is to be the new Adam, endlessly tempted with a novel forbidden fruit, eternally invited to risk again this repeated horror of my disturbed unconsciousness. This fruit promises an infant-like contentment...a respite from my daily labors, a cessation from my particular burdens, a Sabbath, a seventh day of divinely ordained rest. Yet my own fears prevent any such consummation.

An endless torment is this Eden of mine. I neither can stay in this Garden, nor earn my bread on a new Earth. Either choice plagues me.

Why is it that I dream in such a diabolic way? My story of dread is easily told.

When I was but a child I experienced a night of blood, of horror, of murder, that becomes—if this were possible—worse each time I relive it, unwillingly, in my singular dream. Nightmare is a better word, but still infinitely inadequate. Mankind has no fitting word for what tortures me.

I slept well then, as does a normal babe, for this I had been only a few years before. In fact I was still a young boy, secure within a comforting family. I repeat: then I slept soundly. Yet I woke that night. Had I not wakened then I would also have been slaughtered. A distinct and separate suspicion haunts my

brain. Perhaps it would have been better if I too had been murdered that night. Perhaps it would have been an act of mercy, if it were true that the blameless dead rest in an eternal and restful peace.

A distorted and muffled sound woke me. Instantly, by some unseen and psychic means, I knew its origin and the circumstances. My father was dead already. My mother was dying at that precise moment. The sound was that last that she would make on Earth. I repeat: I can not explain how I arrived at my knowledge of this malevolent truth. The sound was her death cry—soft, yes, but a yet gasp of death.

So many times in my dream have I again heard that sound! Was it, as I often suspect, the last act of a mother attempting to protect her child? Did she employ that bond I formed with her when still in the womb to warn her child? Did she give her own life to give me a few precious seconds of warning?

In the same instant that I awoke there rushed into my brain a precise and frozen fear. I am ashamed to admit it. However, I can not deny the truth, as I experience it again, and again. Rather than seeking a means to protect my parents, or even seeking immediately to avenge their deaths, I feared only for myself. I faced, that is I knew that I would face, my own mortal peril. My entire being was filled with a most paramount passion—there is no other word!—for mere physical survival.

I decided nothing, in that my brain did not select rationally among alternatives. Only a far deeper instinct ruled me. I was but its passive recipient. Instantly I was out from my bed and into the middle of the room. My brain

understood that darkness would aid, rather than hinder, me. Darkness could serve as an impediment against discovery. As a young child I could offer no effective physical resistance.

I see myself paralyzed by fear for a few moments. I observe myself move to hide under the bed. Immediately this choice was rejected. Any intruder would look there first, and I would be immobile, caught like some helpless beast in jaws of an iron trap. I was taken by some force then to the closet. It was decided that this too had the same fatal defect. The sound of soft, but heavy, footsteps came to my ears.

My own death stood at the other side of a door. My bedroom had a desk for my youthful scholarship. My mother had insisted that my father modify it. A large compartment had been fabricated so that I could place a globe in it. This item had been my favorite present from my last birthday. My childhood had been filled with dreams of travel and with adventures with heroes of the Ages of Faith. The globe had made these dreams seem less fantastic.

I had often imagined myself a knight, on a Crusade, fighting against the infidel Mohammadeans. I, even though not a Papist, in my imagination often assumed the identity of the famed Hospitaliers, or the Knights of St John, later known as The Knights of Malta. These men were often referred to as warrior-monks, as they combined in their one vocation both callings. Yet, no matter how fiercely they fought for their holy cause, they ever remained committed to the charitable treatment of the ill and injured. These knights manned war galleys, fortresses and hospitals with equal indifference to the comforts of the common and temporal life. They carried the sword in one hand, and medicine in the other.

These warriors of compassion wore a singular emblem on their chests, namely the distinctive Maltese Cross. This cross is of four equal arms, each a narrow triangle in shape, with these four points meeting at the center. The far ends of the triangles were spread, yielding a cross with eight points. Often, in my daydreams I traced this symbol on my study books.

So conditioned was I to fantasies involving these knights that, even now, at the point of death, my brain formed this association upon seeing the globe and the compartment where it was stored. These knights, when faced with overwhelming opposition, would hide in castles. My mother had insisted that my globe be placed, every night, within the large space within the desk, lest it be carelessly damaged by her careless child.

Strangely my mother had often noted that the space was large enough for me to hide in. When I was slightly past infancy she would play a farcical game with me in which I would hide there and she pretend that I could not be found. This space was sizeable, but was it large enough for my present size? I removed the globe and forced myself into it.

I was small for my age. I would ever remain so. Later, when the normal course of events demonstrated how being shorter than the common man was a disadvantage, I would recall this night, when being less than average saved my life.

There was almost but not quite enough room; the door would not close fully. I could not slide home the securing latch. I could only hold it close against me. I could hope that the intruder would conclude that the door was closed fast,

and that the space was too compact for any possible concealment. I can not describe what I felt at this time to be hope. The conflicting impressions revolved in such rapid succession that no one of them was allowed to be paramount. There is no human capacity to explain the mind's responses in the next few terror filled moments.

I heard the bedroom door open. I was placed in my sanctuary in such a way that I could see some of my room...and the movements of the intruder who carried my death in his hands. He carried a lantern of some kind. It did not give much light. But he did not anticipate needing a high degree of illumination. He moved deliberately to my bed. I heard him mutter a blasphemy against a divinity that had permitted his prey a few more moments of life.

Would he leave now? Having already murdered several humans surely escape must now be his strongest desire. Would he be rash enough to consume additional time in a search for me?

He knelt down to search under the bed. His hand, to maintain balance, rested itself upon my globe. My favorite possession was supporting the very man who sought to end my life. The irony of the action was exquisite, and yet even this was to be exceeded in the very next moment. Something beyond fear possessed me so that I could not look away. My vision was transfixed on that hand. It had a most unexpected tattoo on the back, above the fingers. It was an eight pointed Maltese Cross, the emblem wore by those heroic knights of my imagination. How could this man be associated with those champions of virtue whom I most admired?

For years I have contemplated this question. My only conclusion is that the choice was an act of supreme mockery—a blasphemous defiance of God and of what was holy among men. I have long since concluded that this was the sign of some collective group, some diabolic cult, a secret infernal organization, or perhaps a criminal conspiracy dedicated to some hellish purpose.

This knight of slaughter rose and walked to the closet. He coughed once, and the sound was strange, as if there were some chronic lung defect. My father had long suffered from a similar condition. As he opened the door I saw the light reflect weakly off a steel blade held in this other hand. It was as if his sinful masquerade of a Hospitalier was to be completed by his carrying a sword, the emblematic weapon of a knight.

Despite my fervid fear I was possessed of an unnatural fascination with his movements and his search. I felt—I know that this is most strange, but it is true—some comforting satisfaction. I, only a child, had outwitted this man. He turned once more towards the center of the room. I surmised that he looked about. I could not see his features. He searched the bed clothes, as if, perhaps, I remained hidden beneath the covers.

I felt a compulsion to shout. I would command him to leave. I would summon help. My voice would frighten him into fleeing. I was filled with a suppressed compulsion and had to take some action. The force increased, growing stronger every second. I had to hold my fingers over my mouth, lest I scream. I heard my own blood beating in my ears as if it were as loud as a

locomotive. How could he fail to hear it? Why had he not already pulled open the door, and taking his long blade—

I felt myself losing consciousness. How supremely ironic, in this evening of pure ironic horror! I, who would later seek vainly blessed unconsciousness thousand of times, now fought to stay awake and aware. I knew that if I slept I then would fall out of the confined space. I would be discovered...and then...

Yet this is what must have happened. The next memories, in sharp contrast to those few vivid seconds of danger, remain vague and confused. My family indeed had been murdered. The investigators had no suspects. I could provide no useful information. There were comments, only half spoken, that my father had belonged to some secret society, and had fatally broken some unwritten, but grievous, rule. My questions on the subject were ignored. According to this hypothesis the murders had been his punishment for some offense so grave as to require the deaths of his entire family. I had escaped only by a capricious fate. Could the game that my mother had so often played with me actually have been a precautionary rehearsal for the night of slaughter? Had she suspected that some day avenging death would find her family?

I was sent to live with distant relatives. For some time, strangely, I returned to an outwardly normal life. I attended school, pursued my conventional studies, engaged in games with my friends. I sought to learn a profession to earn my living. I prepared to take my proper place in society. Then, as a young man, my dream began. As I have related, as it became a fixed part of my life, I lost the ability to sleep.

No physician could comfort me. In my desperation I sought some relief in forbidden drugs and drink. Despite the early and strict moral teaching given to me by my mother, I entered into the dark world of forbidden substances, and also into the criminal cosmos. I gained knowledge of chemicals more comprehensive than that of university professors. There were drugs that would produce in me, not peaceful sleep, but a category of a temporary coma. Rather than being a surcease this produced a subsequent result that was even worse. Unable to wake up when the dream terror began, I would endure it over and over, without any escape. In my normal state I would awaken whenever the murderer entered my room. It was far better never to sleep than to endure again and again that night.

I have related that I was small, and relatively weak compared to my peers. The lack of sleep inflicted upon me poor health. This precluded occupations of a physical nature. I had become a poor student once the dream began. Becoming a criminal seemed predestined. I believe now that perhaps my choice of this profession had another motive. The murderer, if he still lived, might well dwell among the community of criminals. I reasoned that if the tattoo of the cross could not be removed, it then would mark him forever. Perhaps I could identify him, and execute him. Perhaps my dream was based upon the guilt that I had failed my mother. Perhaps a realized justice would allow me to sleep once again.

However, as if still hampered by the spirit of my mother, I did not join the world of the most serious criminals. I walked among the burglar, the thief, the fraud. I merely met the robber and the murderer. I would not become wholly

evil. I wanted to commit only one murder, and not turn my soul over to live the life of the executioner.

Yet my quest came to haunt me nearly as much as my lack of sleep. I examined every hand tattoo. I identified men not by their faces, but by their hands. I strained to hear again that strange cough. My desire created a queer anticipation. Every cough sounded like the one I had heard. Many criminals, in contemptible attempts to gain acceptance from their peers, arranged for various tattoos to be inked upon their persons. However, I found no Maltese Crosses among these manifold patterns. My fervid imagination attempted to produce nonexistent evidence. The man I sought was nowhere; perhaps he was dead. Yet I saw him potentially everywhere.

In a futile attempt to aid my search I had a Maltese Cross inscribed upon my own hand. I hoped that this might induce others to remark that they had seen others like it before. From such contacts I might develop intelligence regarding the murderer.

Inevitably, I was arrested and convicted. I was confined to jail. It was a minor offense. I consoled myself with the fact that I would not be imprisoned long. For some reason, not quite clear even to myself I concealed my own cross tattoo. This would allow me to identify the murderer, and yet he would not suspect me of being in the same cult, if in fact this were what it signified. My knowledge of chemicals allowed me to bleach the skin so well that my mark was not noticeable.

I repeat: I had been properly raised by my mother. My criminality did not fit me well. I had assumed it, as I testified, only to find an artificial means to achieve justice, and perhaps to reacquire the ability to sleep. I never fully accepted the mores of the lawless community. This was especially true of my period in this jail. Superimposed upon the customs of the at large criminal was a new set of respectful, or disrespectful, behaviors. Violations against a member of the prisoner hierarchy might well bring an attack, or even worse.

I had been raised to be a professional man. Even though I never completed my studies, compared to these common criminals, I was an exceptional scholar. Thus I was given certain elevated tasks in the jail. Because of my experience with chemicals, I often worked in the infirmary. I knew which substances could be used to treat illnesses, wounds and injuries. The irony of my position was not lost upon me. It took imprisonment for me finally to become a Hospitalier. For the knights, no matter how often they killed, always sought to cure. Because of the relative lack of seriousness of my crimes I was given the status of a trustee, with a large degree of freedom.

The jail assigned two men to a cell. My cell mate, a significantly older man, had injured his hand in an accident while working on repairs to another cell. The corrective treatment would be simple, but the official prison physician was always indifferent, and frequently drunk, and would not trouble himself. This prison was the worst within the system, containing the lowest of criminals, and the most corrupt guards, as well as incompetent administrators. On my own authority I treated the hand, and restored its use. He reacted with an animal like

loyalty, as if from a despairing soul which is grateful for even the most minute kindnesses. By his depraved standards him my reaction had been an unexpected and unmerited miracle. I did nothing to dissuade him. I knew enough of the criminal universe to realize that having another indebted to me could be a great advantage.

My cell mate was a large, powerful and physically repulsive man. His many scars gave evidence of a life of successful violent combats. He was recognized by others as a dangerous man. Yet there seemed to be an atom of intelligence within his person. Typically he had a tattoo on the back of his hand, exactly where the murderer had. His tattoo was that of a serpent, bearing an apple, and coiled around a tree. Such anti-theological representations were common in this foul community. Such patterns were self damning commitments Satanic values. I had been among criminals for so long that I no longer cared that my only ally was himself allied to evil.

As I related, we shared a cell. He was afflicted by a cough that was similar to the one that haunted me. Yet by then I had heard this cough so often by now that I no longer noted it; it was far too familiar and common to arouse any suspicion. Recall that I also heard it every time I dreamed, and I dreamed every time I slept.

I came to believe---or perhaps only a hope---that, should I bring an ultimate justice to this matter, then finally I could sleep again. I would yet reform and remove myself from this criminal world, and find a secure and natural place in the world of those who are blessed with ordinary lives, rather than remain

among the cursed whom can never rest while alive. I yet could be what my mother had hoped.

As the officials in charge of the place were profoundly indifferent to our welfare the prisoner formed a self-sustaining hierarchy. At its head was a man known as “Caesar.” He was as cunning, and as dangerous to offend, as his namesake. He was not noticeably large, nor obviously strong. Yet others readily obeyed him. It was rumored that he possessed great influence and wealth beyond the walls. He could, it was said, by generous bribery, arrange for the corrupted guards to be compliant, or absent, when he needed, in secrecy, to enforce punishments upon those who had compromised his self-proclaimed majesty.

I was wise enough to know the danger of giving him offense. I avoided him as much as possible. I was still dedicated to my search. To do this I needed to serve my sentence and be free again. Yet, only days before my release, I endangered all.

Caesar came to the infirmary. His putative reason was to obtain a pain numbing drug for an injury. The injury and the claim were equally false. The amount of this particular drug was low, and there was another prisoner, with a more serious injury. I gave the drug to him, and, as a result, Caesar went without. Only later did I realize that this simple act of basic prudence would be understood by him as a fatal attack on his majesty. I had committed a mortal sin, namely I had treated him as if he were an ordinary prisoner, deserving only equal treatment. Even at the time I felt some uneasiness, as I suspected what the consequences might be. However, I was confident that, for the few remaining

days of my imprisonment, I would be able to avoid him. This tyrant would not seek his satisfaction when witnesses were present.

Foolishly, because Caesar delayed, I slowly relaxed my precautions. If this seems incredible be reminded that I lived a life of perpetual fatigue, because of my lack of sleep. Such a condition does not readily support sustained rational behavior.

One evening I discovered myself to be alone in the infirmary. Caesar appeared. He carried a long steel knife, like a sword. He began to walk towards me. There was no possibility of escape and no help to summon. I felt a deep terror. *It was that night*, being relived yet again. The advantage given him by his weapon rendered any possibility of effective resistance utterly futile. There was no place to hide, and no exit. I tried to comfort myself with thought of being again with my family. I was tempted to hope that there was no punishment in the afterlife, but only an endless uninterrupted sleep.

Then I remembered the chemicals. Some were quite caustic. Some were poison, used to destroy the rats that infested the place. I seized a bottle and threw it at my murderer. He raised his hand. The bottle spilled and the fluid flowed onto the hand. He howled, animal like, in his agony. However, such was his resolve that he was able, despite his injuries, to continue. I beheld my own death in the steel of his weapon.

As I stood frozen motionless by fear, the elder prisoner appeared. How he knew of my peril I did not know. He held a construction tool in his hand, like a heavy hammer, probably something he has used in his assigned labors. Caesar

turned to face them, and then back to me. This was his fatal error. My cell mate struck before Caesar could react. He fell.

A new fear possessed me. This killing would extend my sentence, possibly for life. We must not be discovered here, with the body. Suddenly, in a life replete with ironies, I realized one more. To be alone with me Caesar must have arranged for the guards to be away from their assigned posts near the infirmary. So there were no witnesses to link us with this fatal deed. It might not be discovered until the next morning. If we could evade the preliminary investigation then we might be able to escape any accusation.

I sought to determine that the criminal ruler were truly dead. I searched for a pulse in his wrist. There was none. He also had a tattoo on his hand. The fluid was still fresh on it. I noticed that the fluid had begun to remove the tattoo. The ink was not quite permanent, or this chemical had a property of which I had been ignorant. It would have been too coincidental if the tattoo had been the cross. It was not. It was of a typical serpent and tree pattern.

My savior came up to me. He offered a plan, by which we might escape detection from the authorities. He noticed my fascination with the tattoo. He explained that many criminals had a second tattoo installed over a first. Any tattoo was putatively a permanent form of identification. The second one might lead law authorities to invalid identifications, and prevent justice from being done. For this purpose they employed a strong, but not completely permanent, category of ink for the subsequent patterns. It thus could be altered many times.

Despite my life of crime I had learned nothing of this practice. I was crushed to find that my own knowledge of criminal use of chemicals had not been universal. This deception technique meant that my searching may have been in vain. I may well have rejected the true murderer because I had been deceived by a mere cosmetic deception that had concealed beneath it the enduring image of the incriminating cross.

With a feverish expectation I wiped away this secondary ink. If there were a Maltese Cross below the surface, then I might consider my quest to be over. There was a permanent tattoo, beneath the first, but it was also nothing like a cross. It appeared to be some Masonic symbol. My parents were still not avenged. Only my life had been saved. That is, my endless torment of nightmares had been extended, *ad infinitum*.

I noted the hand of my comrade. In defending me his hand had been cut. I sought the proper medicine to treat it. He submitted only after protests, and refused my efforts to employ a bandage, as if he did not want me to see his wound. While I hid the corpse in an unused closet I noted that he fashioned a crude bandage for himself.

I closely followed my cell mate as he left the infirmary. Doors that should have been locked were not. Guards were not in their accustomed places. Our journey "home" was uneventful. It was yet another irony. Caesar had obviously arranged for these convenient negligences. Now his ultimate act of corruption would protect his own killers.

My cell mate took Caesar's "sword" with him. I carried two vials. The contents of one would quickly induce a deep and senseless sleep. I had often used it when the necessity for rest outweighed fear of my nightmare. I offered it to my companion. An expression of distrust came across his face---the natural response of the professional criminal involved in a join crime. I explained my plan. After I administered it he would sleep, almost immediately. What if the body were discovered soon, and the guards conducted an immediate investigation? Any guard who inspected our cell would discover him soundly sleeping. There would be no feigned deception that might not deceive a guard and would arouse suspicion. With regards to myself, guards were accustomed to finding me awake at any hour.

His life of crime had inculcated in him this deep suspicion, even of me, his grateful comrade. He told me to drink first. I raised a bottle to my lips and drank. Relieved he took the bottle that I offered him and drank. I commented on the bandage. Its presence testified against us. Some guard might notice it and begin an inquiry into its cause. I began to remove it.

Suddenly he stopped me. He took my hand and twisted it. He then examined my fingers with a brief but intense concentration. I had been born with a minor, but unique, variation in one of my fingers. It was not noticeable under normal usage. When extending an item my smallest finger would project at an odd angle. I need only add that I inherited this from my father, who had the exact same abnormality. It was a unique family characteristic. The male members of my family had it. He focused on it, for what seemed to be forever. Then he laughed, quietly. And I heard again the familiar cough.

The infirmary fluids had spilled on my and had diluted the bleaching agent that I had used to disguise my cross tattoo. My cross tattoo was now visible. He looked at it and laughed again. I attributed this to a release of nervous energy. Yet there was in his face an expression of a satisfied but evil comprehension, as if he had learned a profound secret.

He released my hand, and, compelled by some indistinct necessity, I removed the bandage on his hand. He offered no resistance. The fluid had removed his own secondary tattoo. Under it a Maltese Cross was revealed. It was the same cross that I had seen so often, both in dreams, so many times, and in reality, so long ago.

*My savior was the very man I had so long sought to kill.* Now I understood his fascination with my finger. He also recognized me as my father's son. Was he still a member of some secret society? Was he still, by his own sense of honor, or by the words of some unalterable oath, compelled to kill me? Was I still obligated to kill him? Or had his act of life saving violence redeemed him? Had one additional murder absolved him from the guilt of the others? The enigma grew more complex as I tried to analyze it. Were we not only fatal conspirators, but also enemies to the death?

I mentioned that my mother had raised me properly. I recalled the Bible verse, "an eye for an eye." It also decreed "a life for a life." I knew now that it meant not only punishment but also remission. Had this man paid for his long ago murders by saving my life? Was this enough of the justice I had sought?

We both knew where he had hidden the sword. In a physical contest whoever of us first possessed it would have an insurmountable advantage. I noticed his eyelids began to close. I knew how quickly the sleep inducing contents of the bottle would work. He was already exhausted by his extreme and unique exertions, so it even more rapidly complemented the consequence of his natural fatigue. I, who could know no sleep, knew well the signs of its irresistible invitation. Even if he were convinced that he would die if he slept, he could stay awake for no more than a few moments.

Nor could I. He did not know that I had drunk from a different vial than the one I gave to him. Mine truly would induce sleep, and rapidly... and safely. *However, his draught had been poison.* There might still be time for an antidote, if I decided that he was now acquitted. During the activity in the infirmary I had already noticed his damning cross tattoo. As I watched, the first toxic reaction took place within him. I saw a sense of resolve in his expression. He would stay awake... perhaps to revenge prematurely his death upon me. *He knew what I had done!*

My own drug was taking effect. I had to resist the invitation to sleep, as it might mean my death. Yet the temptation to surrender was overwhelming. I seemed already to be asleep. I was again in my room, and I heard again the last cry of my mother. And then I knew. He may well have atoned for the death of my father, but not for my mother. As long as he lived she would not rest in peace in her grave. That sleep I could obtain for her, as the last act of a loving son...if I could carry it out.

As I involuntarily closed my eyes I speculated upon one last thought:  
Would it be that the first of us to sleep would die at the hands of the other?

I do not sleep.