

THREE SKELETON KEY

Story by George Toudouze 1937

Adaptation by James Poe 1949

(with minor revisions by One Act Audio Theatre 2004)

1 JEAN (narrates): Picture this place. A gray, tapering cylinder welded, by iron rods and
2 concrete, to the key itself: a bare black rock, one hundred fifty feet long, maybe forty
3 wide. That's at low tide. At high tide, just the lighthouse, rising a hundred ten feet
4 straight up out of the ocean, and all about it the churning water - gray-green, scum
5 dappled, warm as soup, and swarming with gigantic bat-like, devil fish, great violet
6 schools of Portuguese man-of-war, and yes, sharks, the big ones, the fifteen-footers.

7 And as if this weren't enough, there was a hot, dank, rotten-smelling wind that came at
8 us day and night off the jungle swamps of the mainland. A wind that smelled like ...
9 death. A wind that had smelled the slow and frightful death that came one night to this
10 bare black rock.

11 Set in the base of the light was a watertight bronze door ... and in you went. And up.
12 Yes, up and up and 'round and 'round, past the tanks of oil and the coils of rope, casks of
13 wicks and racks of lanterns, sacks of spuds, and cartons and cans and up and up and up,
14 'round and 'round. Over the light storeroom was the food storeroom. And over the
15 food storeroom was the bunk room where the three of us slept. And over the bunk
16 room was the living and cooking room. And over the living and cooking room was the
17 light.

18 She was a beauty. Big steel and bronze baby with the sun gleaming through the glass
19 walls all about, bouncing blinding little beams off the big shiny reflectors, glittering and
20 refracting through her lenses. The whole gigantic bulk of her balanced like a ballerina
21 on the glistening steel axle of the rotary mechanism. She was a sweetheart of a light.

22 And at night, you'd lie there on the stone deck of the gallery with her revolving smoothly
23 and quietly over your head) easing her bright white eye three hundred sixty degrees
24 around the horizon. You'd lie there watching to see that the feeders kept working, that
25 everything ran right. And it wouldn't be bad. The other two fellows snoring in their
26 sacks two levels down. You'd smoke your pipe to kill the stink of the wind and it
27 wouldn't be bad.

28 About those other two. Louis and Auguste. What a pair. Louis, he was head man, was a
29 big fellow from the Basque country. Black beard, little hard black eyes and a pair of
30 arms that - I tell you, those arms were as big around as my legs. Yes, head man he was,
31 and what word he let go was law. A silent fellow. And although I spent my first two
32 weeks trying to strike up a real conversation, the most I could ever get out of him was...

33 LOUIS: Jean, I took up this profession because I don't like people. They want to talk too
34 much. It's quiet work, light-tending. Let's keep it that way. You - you're getting to be as
35 bad as Auguste. I thought maybe for once they'd send me somebody who could keep
36 his mouth shut...

37 JEAN (narrates): That was Louis. When he accused me of becoming like Auguste, I
38 quieted down because Auguste was the talking-est man I'd ever met. The talking-est
39 and the ugliest. He was hunchbacked, stood four feet high, had red hair and big blue
40 eyes. It seems he'd been an actor in Paris.

41 AUGUSTE: Yes, yes, indeed! Played in over two hundred different productions, dear
42 boy. At the Grand Guignol. Oh, but it was monstrous, horrible, the way we used to
43 scare the audiences. I-I was hated. Yes, yes. They used to throw things and hiss and
44 bare their teeth at me. Finally, it got too bad. I couldn't stand it any longer. I gave up
45 the theatre. My nerves, you understand. Yes, gave it up completely, I really did.
46 Couldn't stand it any longer...

47 JEAN (narrates): It all started one morning at two-thirty. I was on watch, lying on the
48 cool stone deck, pulling on my pipe, staring out at the blackness, the phosphorescent
49 foam, crashing across the reef, and the big yellow stars, when out of the corner of my
50 eye, I noticed something show up for a second. Something the light had touched, far
51 off.

52 I waited for the light to come around again and when she did, there it was. A three
53 master. A big one. About a half mile off and coming down out of the north-northwest;
54 coming straight for us. You must understand. Our light was where it was for a very
55 good reason. Dangerous submerged reefs surrounded us and ships kept clear. But this
56 one, this sailing vessel was coming straight on.

57 I went over to the galley door and yelled (yells) Louis! Louis! (narrates again). Couldn't
58 understand it. I waited for the light to come around again.

59 LOUIS (below): What is it?

60 JEAN: Ship headed for the reef!

61 LOUIS (below): Coming right up!

62 JEAN (narrates): I had the glasses out now. I couldn't read her name but I could see her
63 quite plainly. All sails set. And the foam creaming away under her bow. Her beautiful
64 lines. A Dutch ship, I guessed her. But why didn't she turn?

65 LOUIS: Ship? Where?

66 JEAN: North-northwest. The light will touch her in a moment.

67 LOUIS: A three master?

68 JEAN: Look at her. She just keeps coming on.

69 LOUIS: Can't they see?

70 AUGUSTE: What? What is it?

71 JEAN: Watch north-northwest.

72 AUGUSTE: I know what it is. The Dutchman.

73 LOUIS: What?

74 AUGUSTE: The Flying Dutchman. We did a play about her once. Oh, what a
75 performance! "Ye ghastly galleon, hag-ridden, curse-ridden ..."

76 LOUIS: Shut up, will you? (Looking at the ship) She's luffing.

77 JEAN: Yes.

78 LOUIS: Sloppy way to come about. Ah, she's derelict, that's it.

79 JEAN: Derelict?

80 LOUIS: Abandoned. The crew left it for some reason or other. But instead of sinking,
81 she's gone on, running before every wind.

82 AUGUSTE: She'll not run long. Not with these reefs to break her up.

83 LOUIS: Beautiful ship. Now, why would men leave a beautiful ship like that?

84 JEAN (narrates): We watched her the rest of those black hours, heeling and rocking,
85 pushed and pulled by every stray wind, every freak current. Watched her until the
86 dawn came, til the sea turned from black to a pearly gray. And on she came again,
87 heading for us. We all had our glasses trained on her now.

88 LOUIS: Auguste? You can kill the light.

89 AUGUSTE (distant): Right, chief.

90 JEAN: She doesn't look so good by daylight. Think she'll ground this time?

91 LOUIS: What?

92 JEAN: ... I say, do you think she'll ground this time?

93 LOUIS: This is impossible. Absolutely impossible.

94 JEAN: What is it -- (narrates) I had to focus, and then my breath froze in my throat. The
95 decks were swarming with a dark brown carpet that looked like a gigantic fungus, and
96 on the masts and yards, the guys and all, were hundreds, no thousands, no, mill- I don't
97 know, an endless undulating carpet of enormous... rats.

98 LOUIS: See them?

99 JEAN: Yes, I see them.

100 LOUIS: Now we know why she's derelict.

101 JEAN: Yes, now we know.

102 AUGUSTE: What are you two doing? Here, give me a look.

103 LOUIS (to Jean): Yes, give him the glasses, (to Auguste) Take a good look, chatterbox.
104 Give you something to talk about.

105 JEAN: She's still heading for us.

106 LOUIS: Yes.

107 JEAN: If she's going to turn, she'd better turn soon.

108 LOUIS: Suppose she doesn't?

109 JEAN: You mean suppose she piles up on the key?

110 LOUIS: It's low tide.

111 JEAN: Yes. Yes, it is.

112 LOUIS: Where's all the conversation, Auguste? Huh? Here, go on, take another look?

113 AUGUSTE; No! No!

114 JEAN: She's still coming on.

115 AUGUSTE (to the ship): Go away! Go away!

116 LOUIS (to the ship): Turn, will you! Turn, I say! I pray you, turn!

117 JEAN: She's cracking up.

118 AUGUSTE: The rats! Look! On the water! Like a carpet!

119 JEAN: They're swimming.

120 LOUIS: Sure they're swimming. Those are ship's rats.

121 JEAN: But they're swimming for the rocks!

122 AUGUSTE: The door below! It's open!

123 LOUIS: Come on.

124 JEAN (narrates): Down we went, racing down the stone stairs, taking them three and
125 four at a time. Scared? You bet we were scared.

126 LOUIS: Auguste! You get the windows.

127 AUGUSTE: Right, chief. Hurry! Hurry!

128 LOUIS: Look! See them?

129 JEAN: No.... Oh, yes, I do. Up at the other end of the rock.

130 LOUIS: Look at them.

131 JEAN: Millions.

132 LOUIS: They smell us. Here they come! Close the door.

133 JEAN: Can't. It's ... stuck.

134 LOUIS: Here, let me ...

135 JEAN: Made it.

136 LOUIS: That was close.

137 JEAN: One got in. Look. There.

138 LOUIS: Get him!

139 JEAN (narrates): He was as big as a tomcat. Bigger. His eyes were wild and red. His
140 teeth, long and sharp and yellow. He went for us, starved and ravenous, and we fought
141 him, fought that one rat all over the room. It was - oh, believe me, I do not exaggerate,
142 it was like fighting a panther.

143 LOUIS: Got him.

144 JEAN: We better get aloft.

145 JEAN (narrates): As we ran up the winding staircase, we passed the tiny windows at the
146 various levels and at every one was a thick, writhing, screaming curtain of brown fur. I
147 was ahead of Louis and I dreaded each successive level. Suppose they had found a way
148 in?

149 AUGUSTE: Look at them. Will you look at them?

150 LOUIS: It's a nightmare.

151 AUGUSTE: Will you look at them?

152 JEAN (narrates): The air of the gallery was thick and fetid with the stink of them. The
153 light was dim. Brown. Filtered through the crawling mass that swarmed over the glass
154 all about us. We could not see the sky. Nothing. Nothing but them. Their red eyes.
155 Their claws. Their wriggling, hairy snouts. Their teeth. The rats. They screamed and
156 howled and threw themselves against the glass. They were starving. And we three, we
157 stood... very quietly. Very, very quietly in the center of the glass room under our
158 beautiful light. And we waited.

159 AUGUSTE: What can we do? What can we do?

160 LOUIS: Take it easy, little man. Take it easy.

161 AUGUSTE: I-I-I can't tolerate this –

162 JEAN: It won't do any good to stand here and shake.

163 LOUIS: Yeah. That's right. Anybody... want a cigarette?

164 AUGUSTE: Yes. Yes, I'll have one. Thank you.

165 LOUIS: Good boy. We've got to keep calm about this thing. Here's a light.

166 AUGUSTE: They don't like the fire, do they?

167 LOUIS: Guess not.

168 AUGUSTE: Give me another match.

169 AUGUSTE: You don't like that much? (to the others) Turn the lights on.

170 LOUIS: Don't rile them, Auguste.

171 AUGUSTE: Give me some more matches. I'll strike them and strike them and strike
172 them until they get scared and go away.

173 LOUIS: They won't go away. Not until...

174 AUGUSTE: What?! Not until what?

175 LOUIS: Not until they've been... fed.

176 JEAN (narrates): You can take just so much horror and then you get used to it. And they
177 were interesting to watch, you know. They couldn't understand the glass. They could
178 see us and they could rush at us but that thin invisible barrier held them off, stopped
179 them. From time to time, we caught a glimpse of the rocks below. More rats down
180 there. And then the tide began to rise.

181 JEAN: If only it'd drown some of them.

182 AUGUSTE: Ship's rats don't drown. No, sir. You cannot drown one of them. They're all
183 climbing up the tower.

184 LOUIS: This bunch around us is getting thicker.

185 JEAN: Yeah. Say, what's the time?

186 AUGUSTE: Quarter of six.

187 LOUIS: You've got first watch, Jean.

188 JEAN: Right.

189 LOUIS: Uh, wake me at ten.

190 JEAN: I will.

191 LOUIS: Come along, Auguste.

192 JEAN (narrates): It was getting dark. One side of the room was lit in a soft filtered red.
193 Sunset through the rats. Oh ho. Very pretty. I set the weights, checked my fuel and
194 then lit the lamp.

195 JEAN (narrates): It caught them, lit them in their gigantic wriggling web of pale, hairless
196 bellies, twitching red tails, bright eyes. Then I started the rotary motor. The light drove
197 them mad as she swung slowly and smoothly about. It blinded them in the fierce,
198 stabbing bar of light, moving continually about, ever turning, ever touching, ever moving
199 around and around. And they, twisting and stuttering, eyes flaming when they were
200 struck by the light. The bright light moving and, behind, on the dark side of the room, so
201 close - so close I dared not turn my back but you cannot help turning your back when
202 you're in a room made of glass - on the dark side of the room, you could not see them.
203 Only their eyes. Thousands of points of blank red light, blinking and twinkling like the
204 stars of hell.

205 Louis relieved me at ten but I didn't get much sleep that night and when I came up into
206 the galley early next morning, there stood Auguste, his back to me. He was bowing to
207 the rats, waving his arms and making a speech.

208 AUGUSTE: My dear, dear audience. I am going to play once again that magnificent role
209 which made me the toast of the Paris theatre. I am the evil genius of the medieval
210 underworld. I am he who did guide the dark soul of the dead into the nether parts,
211 (cackles maniacally) Do not be frightened, little children. I will not hurt you.

212 JEAN (narrates): I stood, staring at him, horror-struck. But he didn't notice me. The
213 man had gone mad. He kept turning, telling his stories to all the rats) leaving no one
214 out. (to Auguste) Auguste?

215 AUGUSTE): Ah! Another one. A latecomer. Take a seat on the aisle, dear patron.

216 JEAN: Auguste! Stop it!

217 AUGUSTE: Move over there. Let the gentleman be seated.

218 JEAN: Stop it!!

219 JEAN (narrates): But he didn't stop. He went on, bowing and scraping to the rats. His
220 big blue eyes rolling and winking, his wild red hair waving about him. I grabbed him by
221 the arms, slapped his face. He looked at me like a child. And then his face screwed up.
222 He looked as though he were about to cry. (harshly, to Auguste) Go below. Go on.

223 AUGUSTE: Very well, then. (to the rats) Later, my dear audience, later. Matinee today.

224 JEAN (narrates): Sure, he was crazy. But I guess we all were. A few hours later, he
225 came back up and caught Louis and me teasing the rats. It was fun. We would get right
226 up against the glass and make faces at them. It drove them crazy. They would scratch
227 away, trying to get at our eyes. Louis was even cuter about it. He'd pull a piece of bread
228 out of his pocket and press it against the glass. The rats would scramble into a solid ball,
229 biting each other, clustering like grapes. From time to time, a whole knot of them would
230 slip and fall the hundred ten feet to the surf below.

231 LOUIS: Ha ha! Look at the sharks.

232 JEAN: They're eating them.

233 LOUIS: Yeah, the sharks are our friends. Here, here. I'll get another bunch together. Ha
234 ha ha! (to the rats) Here, my beauties. That's it.

235 LOUIS (to the rats): Pile up! Kill each other! Ha, ha, ha!

236 LOUIS: There they go!

237 JEAN (narrates): Auguste joined in, too. Oh, very ingenious, Auguste. He learned that if
238 he spread eagled himself against the glass, they'd bunch and bundle against his figure.
239 Then he'd leap back...

240 AUGUSTE; Look! My portrait ...in rats!

241 JEAN (narrates): It went on all day. And then... I was lying in bed. It was about
242 midnight. I was very tired and I was just beginning to fall off to sleep when I became
243 conscious of a new sound. Couldn't figure it at first. I got up, lit the lamp and went to
244 the window. Even as I looked at it, I saw one of the panes begin to sag in. They had
245 eaten the wood away!

246 JEAN: Louis! Louis! Wake up!

247 LOUIS (waking): Wha-? What is it?

248 JEAN: They've found a way in.

249 LOUIS: Impossi— No ... dear God, no ...Hold fast!

250 JEAN: What?

251 LOUIS: Keep them out!

252 JEAN: I'll try.

253 LOUIS: Do it!

254 JEAN: Don't leave me here!

255 LOUIS: I'll be back.

256 JEAN: (narrates) I held the glass with my hand. Now, the rats were all going crazy and --
257 assured of success – hundreds of them swarmed over the window, nibbling away at the
258 wood. Louis returned with a large sheet of tin.

259 LOUIS: Here, take this side!

260 JEAN (narrates): We spread it against the window and hammered it into place. Even as
261 we did so) we felt the heavy bodies thudding against the other side as the window gave
262 way.

263 LOUIS: That ought to hold. If it doesn't, we're done for.

264 JEAN: Rats can't eat tin?

265 LOUIS: No. They can't.

266 JEAN: What was that?

267 LOUIS: I don't know. It came from below.

268 JEAN: The storeroom window.

269 LOUIS: They're in! They're swarming up the stairs!

270 JEAN: Drop the trap.

271 LOUIS: Right.

272 JEAN: Two of them got in.

273 LOUIS: Let's go after them.

274 JEAN (narrates): We didn't have to go after them. They came at us, I leaped to one side
275 and grabbed a marlin spike, swung, and smashed one in mid-air.

276 JEAN (narrates): I whirled to see Louis with the other. It had ripped his hand open and
277 the blood was pouring all over the place. He held his hand aloft and kicked at the
278 snarling rat. I stepped and swung and got him.

279 LOUIS: My hand! He got my hand!

280 JEAN: That's both of them, Louis. I'll get you something to tie that up.

281 LOUIS: Blood! Look at it! My- my-! Blood! I'm bleeding!

282 JEAN: Now, don't worry about it, Louis. Here, look, I'll wind this kerchief around it. It'll
283 be okay.

284 LOUIS (whimpering): Blood...

285 JEAN: There now. It's not bad. Just a flesh - (narrates) Then I became conscious of
286 another new sound. They were gnawing their way through the wooden trap door. I
287 watched the wood, fascinated. And even as I did, it began to give way. And a bristling,
288 whiskery nose showed through. (to Louis) Louis. Louis, we've got to go up.

289 JEAN (narrates): Next level was the living quarters and the kitchen. I slammed the trap
290 door there, too. But it too was wood.

291 LOUIS: My... blood. (to Jean) What are we going to do?

292 JEAN: I don't know. They'll be through this one in a moment.

293 LOUIS: The gallery. The trap door in the gallery is metal.

294 JEAN: Good. Come on.

295 JEAN (narrates): We made it. We lay across the trap door, exhausted, while below us,
296 the rats took over the entire tower. I could hear them howling and fighting over our
297 food supply, our water, our leather. And all about, the others screamed and glared in at
298 us, swayed in a tangled mass, hypnotized by the ever-turning light.

299 By morning, the air in the little room was horrible. Until now, we'd been getting air
300 from the tower below. Now that was sealed off. So was all our food and water. We lay
301 exhausted, panting, waiting, waiting. The hours crawled on. I was almost dozing from
302 fatigue when I saw a sight that made me wish I was dreaming.

303 AUGUSTE: Would you like to come in, my beauties? Would you? I hold the powers of
304 life and death. And I can let you in to my little drama.

305 JEAN (narrates): Auguste was standing by the glass and in one hand he held a wrench.

306 JEAN (narrates): He was tapping the glass gently. Not quite hard enough to break it. I
307 eased myself to my feet and slowly, very slowly, tiptoed toward him.

308 AUGUSTE (to the rats): All I have to do is tap just a little harder. Uhh-

309 JEAN (narrates): I found a coil of wire in the tool kit and I trussed him up. Fastened him
310 to a stancheon in the center of the room. Louis was of no help. He lay on his side
311 looking at his bloody hand, weak and sick as a baby. So there I was, a lunatic and a
312 coward for company, and all about, watching our little drama, the rats. ...

313 The day dragged by. The supply boat wasn't due for another twelve days. I don't know
314 what they could have done if they had come. We had only one way of summoning them
315 and that was to shoot off distress rockets, but the rockets were four floors below. And
316 even if they'd been right there in the gallery, I couldn't have opened a window to fire
317 them. That night, I tended the light, but its flame was devouring our oxygen. The
318 following day, we lay thirst-tormented, starving, waiting, waiting. And the following
319 night, I again tended the light but the small supply of spare Peking we kept in the galley
320 had become exhausted and quite suddenly, about midnight, the light went out.

321 Nothing I could do. The wicks were stored three levels below. Nothing I could do.
322 Nothing. From time to time, I'd strike a match to see the clock. And when I did, it lit up
323 the million red eyes about us. All about. Watching. Waiting. Below, it had grown
324 quiet. They'd cleaned us out and now they too were waiting. All waiting.

325 And then the rats - quite suddenly - were silent.

326 And then, I heard it.

327 And then I saw the sky and the stars. The rats were gone. I went to the glass. Out there
328 in the water, a small freighter - a banana boat - showing a few lights, came softly and
329 innocently at us. The light was out. They didn't know. I wanted to open the windows to
330 call out to them. To warn them somehow but - I was afraid. What if-what if the rats
331 were hiding from me? Tricking me? So I waited. She grounded very softly on a reef not
332 two hundred yards from the key. They tried washing her off the reef. I could have told
333 them to save their fuel ...the tide was rising, it would've floated her free. And I waited.

334 That's all. That's the story. The sun came up and there wasn't a rat on the whole key.
335 Every last one of that terrible army had left us, gone back to sea ... on their new ship.

336 Auguste? Insane asylum. He never recovered. Louis? They took him into Cayenne
337 where he died of blood poisoning from his bite.

338 And me? I took up a position at another lighthouse, where the smell is much better.
339 But sometimes when I see a strange vessel approaching I get a little nervous. After all,
340 somewhere on the seas, there's a little banana boat without a crew.

341 That is ...without a human crew.

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