

Three Skeleton Key – Radio Script

Adapted from the George Toudouze horror story



ANNOUNCER: Tired of the everyday routine? Ever dream of a life of romantic adventure? Want to get away from it all? We offer you... Escape! Escape, designed to free you from the four walls of today for a half hour of high adventure. Tonight, we escape to a lonely lighthouse off the steaming jungle coast of French Guiana and the nightmare world of terror and violence as we bring "Three Skeleton Key".

JEAN (narrates): Picture this place. A gray, tapering cylinder welded, by iron rods and concrete, to the key itself: a bare black rock, one hundred fifty feet long, maybe forty wide. That's at low tide. At high tide, just the lighthouse, rising a hundred ten feet straight up out of the ocean, and all about it the churning water -- gray-green, scum dappled, warm as soup, and swarming with gigantic bat-like, devil fish, great violet schools of Portuguese man-of-war, and yes, sharks, the big ones, the fifteen-footers. And as if this weren't enough, there was a hot, dank, rotten-smelling wind that came at us day and night off the jungle swamps of the mainland. A wind that smelled like death. A wind that had smelled the slow and frightful death that came one night to this bare black rock. Set in the base of the light was a watertight bronze door ...

The door **OPENS** and **SLAMS** shut. Footsteps **TRAMP** up stairs.

JEAN (narrates): ... and in you went. And up. Yes, up and up and 'round and 'round, past the tanks of oil and the coils of rope, casks of wicks and racks of lanterns, sacks of spuds, and cartons and cans and up and up and up, 'round and 'round. Over the light storeroom was the food storeroom. And over the food storeroom was the bunk room where the three of us slept. And over the bunk room was the living and cooking room. And over the living and cooking room was the light.

FOOTSTEPS stop.

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

The slow, steady **CLICK** of the mechanism under the following:

JEAN (narrates): And at night, you'd lie there on the stone deck of the gallery with her revolving smoothly and quietly over over your head, easing her bright white eye three hundred sixty degrees around the horizon. You'd lie there watching to see that the feeders kept working, that everything ran right. And it wouldn't be bad. The other two fellows snoring in their sacks two levels down. You'd smoke your pipe to kill the stink of the wind and it wouldn't be bad. ... About those other two. Louis and Auguste. What a pair. Louis, he was head man, was a big fellow from the Basque country. Black beard, little hard black eyes and a pair of arms that -- I tell you, those arms were as big around as my legs. Yes, head man he was and what word he let go was law. A silent fellow. And although I spent my first two weeks trying to strike up a real conversation, the most I could ever get out of him was...

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

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

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

JEAN (narrates): It all started one morning at two-thirty. I was on watch, lying on the cool stone deck, pulling on my pipe, staring out at the blackness, the phosphorescent combers and the big yellow stars, when out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something show up for a second. Something the light had touched, far off. I waited for her to come around again and when she did, there it was. A three master. A big one. About a half mile off and coming down out of the north-northwest, coming straight for us. You must understand. Our light was where it was for a very good reason. Dangerous submerged reefs surrounded us and ships kept clear. But this one, this sailing vessel was coming straight on.

FOOTSTEPS.

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

LOUIS (yells from down below): What is it?

JEAN: Ship headed for the reef!

LOUIS (below): Coming right up!

JEAN (narrates): I had the glasses out now. I couldn't read her name but I could see her quite plainly. All sails set. And the foam creaming away under her bow. Her beautiful lines. A Dutch ship, I guessed her. But why didn't she turn? Every time it passed, our light hit her with the glare of day.

FOOTSTEPS approach.

LOUIS: Ship? Where?

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

LOUIS: Can't they see?

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

LOUIS: Yeah, the squareheads...

FOOTSTEPS approach.

AUGUSTE: What is it? What is it?

JEAN: Watch north-northwest.

AUGUSTE: I know. I know what it is.

LOUIS: Eh? What?

AUGUSTE: The Dutchman. The Flying Dutchman. We did a play about her once. Oh, what a performance! "You ghastly galleon, hag-ridden, curse-ridden, [?]"

LOUIS: Shut up, will ya? (off the ship) She's luffing.

JEAN: Yes.

LOUIS: Sloppy way to come about. She's derelict, that's it.

JEAN: Derelict?

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

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

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

JEAN (narrates): She didn't ram us although we all expected it. But as we waited for the crash, she luffed again. Caught some odd gust and went about. We watched her the rest of those black hours, heeling and rocking, pushed and pulled by every stray wind, every freak current. Watched her until the dawn came. Till the sea turned from black to a pearly gray. And on she came again, heading for us. We all had our glasses trained on her now.

The light's rotary mechanism **CLICKS**.

LOUIS: Auguste? You can kill the light.

AUGUSTE (distant): Right, chief.

FOOTSTEPS away.

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

LOUIS: What?

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

LOUIS: Hm? This is impossible. Absolutely impossible.

JEAN: What?

LOUIS: Here, take my glasses. They're better than yours.

JEAN: All right. What is it you're --? (narrates) I had to focus, and then my breath froze in my throat. The decks were swarming with a dark brown carpet that looked like a gigantic fungus, but undulating, and on the masts and yards, the guys and all, were hundreds, no thousands, no, mi-- I don't know, an endless [inestimable?] number of enormous... rats.

LOUIS: See them?

JEAN: Yes, I see them.

LOUIS: Now we know why she's derelict.

JEAN: Yes, now we know.

FOOTSTEPS approach.

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

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

JEAN: She's still heading for us.

LOUIS: Yes.

Auguste begins to WHIMPER in fear.

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

LOUIS: Suppose she doesn't?

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

LOUIS: It's low tide.

JEAN: Yes. Yes, it is.

LOUIS: Where's all the conversation, Auguste? Huh? Here, want the glasses again? Want another look?

AUGUSTE: No! No!

JEAN: She's still coming on.

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

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

The ship BREAKS apart on a reef.

JEAN: She's cracking up.

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

JEAN: They're swimming.

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

JEAN: But they're swimming for the rocks!

AUGUSTE: The door below! It's open!

JEAN: Come on.

Three sets of FOOTSTEPS racing down stairs.

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

LOUIS: Auguste! You get the windows. Maybe they can climb. We don't know.

AUGUSTE: Right, chief. But hurry! Hurry!

The FOOTSTEPS slow to a stop.

LOUIS: Look! See them?

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

The distant sound of millions of SQUEAKING rats, growing louder every second.

LOUIS: Look at them.

JEAN: Millions.

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

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

LOUIS: Here, let me...

GRUNTING, they struggle with the door, finally SLAMMING it shut. Muffled SQUEAKING continues.

JEAN: Made it.

LOUIS: That was close.

A single rat SQUEAKS loudly.

JEAN: One got in. Look. There.

LOUIS: Get him!

They CHASE it, HOLLERING and KICKING.

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

Finally, after a death BLOW, the rat SCREAMS and dies. They HIT him a few more times to make sure.

LOUIS: Got him.

JEAN: We better get aloft.

FOOTSTEPS going up.

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

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

LOUIS: It's a nightmare.

AUGUSTE: Will you look at them?

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

AUGUSTE (panics): What can we do? What can we do?

LOUIS: Take it easy, old man. Take it easy.

AUGUSTE: I-I-I can't [?].

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

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

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

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

A match is **STRUCK**. The rats **SHRIEK**.

AUGUSTE (cackles like a madman): They don't like the fire, do they?

LOUIS: Guess not.

AUGUSTE: Give me another match.

Another match is **STRUCK**, the rats **PANIC**.

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

LOUIS: Don't rile them, Auguste.

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

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

AUGUSTE: Finish [it, Chief?]. Not until what?

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

JEAN (narrates): You can take just so much horror and then you get used to it. And they were interesting to watch, you know. They couldn't understand the glass. They could see us and they could rush at us but that thin invisible barrier held them off, stopped them. From time to time, we caught a glimpse of the rocks below. More rats down there. Swarming brown velvet in the bright tropical sunlight. And then the tide began to rise. (to Auguste) If only it'd drown some of them.

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

LOUIS: This bunch around us is getting thicker.

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

AUGUSTE: Quarter of six.

LOUIS: You've got first watch, Jean.

JEAN: Right.

LOUIS: Uh, wake me at ten.

JEAN: I will.

LOUIS: Come along, Auguste.

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

The rats PANIC.

JEAN (narrates): It caught them, lit them in their gigantic wriggling web of pale, hairless bellies, twitching red tails, bright eyes. Then I started the rotary motor.

The motor STARTS. The mechanism CLICKS. The rats' SHRIEKS rise up and down, like the Doppler effect, as the rotating light hits them.

JEAN (narrates): The light drove them mad as she swung slowly and smoothly about. It blinded them in the fierce, stabbing bar of light, moving continually about, ever turning, ever touching, ever moving around and around. And they, twisting and stuttering, eyes flaming when they were struck by the light. The bright light moving and, behind, on the dark side of the room, so close -- so close I dared not turn my back but you cannot help turning your back when you're in a room made of glass -- on the dark side of the room, you could not see them. Only their eyes. Thousands of points of blank red light, blinking and twinkling like the stars of hell.

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

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

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

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

JEAN: Auguste! Stop it! Stop it!

AUGUSTE (to an imaginary patron): Move over there. Let the gentleman be seated.

JEAN (narrates): But he didn't stop. He went on, bowing and scraping to the rats. His big blue eyes rolling and winking, his wild red hair waving about him. I grabbed him by the arms, slapped his face.

Multiple SLAPS to the face.

JEAN (narrates): He looked at me like a child. And then his face screwed up. He looked as though he were about to cry. (harshly, to Auguste) Go below. Go on.

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

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

LOUIS: Ha ha! Look at the sharks.

JEAN: They're eating them.

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

The rats SHRIEK and SCRATCH loudly.

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

The rats' SHRIEKS suddenly fall away.

LOUIS: There they go!

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

AUGUSTE: Look! My portrait... in rats!

JEAN (narrates): It went on all day. And then... I was lying in bed. It was about midnight. I was very tired and I was just beginning to fall off to sleep when I became conscious of a new sound.

An odd CRUNCHING noise.

JEAN (narrates): Couldn't figure it at first. I got up, lit the lamp and went to the window. Even as I looked at it, I saw one of the panes begin to sag in. They had eaten the wood away!

FOOTSTEPS

JEAN (yelling): Louis! Louis! Come quick!

LOUIS: Wha-? What is it?

JEAN: They've found a way in. (narrates) I held the glass with my hand. Now, they were all going crazy and, assured of the success of this maneuver, were all nibbling away at the wood. Louis ran below and then returned with a large sheet of tin.

HAMMERING nails.

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

The HAMMERING stops.

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

JEAN: Rats can't eat tin?

LOUIS: No. They can't.

A distant CRASH of glass.

JEAN: What was that?

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

JEAN: The storeroom window.

FOOTSTEPS start and abruptly stop. Rats SHRIEKING loudly.

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

JEAN: Drop the trap.

LOUIS: Right.

The heavy wooden trapdoor **DROPS**. Two noisy rats **SHRIEK** loudly.

JEAN: Two of them got in.

LOUIS: Let's go after them.

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

A rat is **SMASHED**. Louis **HOLLERS** in pain.

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

Another rat **KILLED**.

LOUIS: My hand! He got my hand!

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

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

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

LOUIS (whimpering): Blood...

JEAN: There now. It's not bad. Just a flesh -- (narrates) Then I became conscious of another new sound.

A quiet **MUNCHING** noise.

JEAN (narrates): They were gnawing their way through the wooden trap door. I watched the wood, fascinated. And even as I did, it began to give way. And a bristling, whiskery nose showed through. (to Louis) Louis. Louis, we've got to go up.

Scrambling **FOOTSTEPS** up the stairs.

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

Another trap door **SLAMS**.

JEAN (narrates): But it too was wood.

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

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

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

JEAN: Good. Come on.

Running **FOOTSTEPS** up the stairs. A metal trap door **SLAMS**.

JEAN (narrates): We made it. ... We lay across the trap door, exhausted, while below us, the rats took over the entire tower. I could hear them howling and fighting over our food supply, our water, our leather. And all about us, the others screamed and glared in at us, swayed in a tangled mass, hypnotized by the ever-turning light. ... By morning, the air in the little room was horrible. Until now, we'd been getting air from the tower below. Now that was sealed off. So was all our food and water. We lay exhausted, panting, waiting, waiting. The hours crawled on. I was almost dozing from fatigue when I saw a sight that brought me to, fast.

AUGUSTE (laughs, to the rats): Would you like to come in, my beauties? Would you? I hold the powers of life and death. And I can let you in [?]

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

Metal **TAPPING** on glass. Auguste **CAACKLING** madly.

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

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

Jean **TACKLES** Auguste and **KNOCKS** him unconscious.

JEAN (narrates): I found a coil of wire in the tool kit and I trussed him up. Fastened him to a stanchion in the center of the room. Louis was of no help. He lay on his side looking at his bloody hand, weak and sick as a baby. So there I was, a lunatic and a coward for company, and all about, watching our little drama, the rats. ... The day dragged by. The supply boat wasn't due for another twelve days. I don't know what they could have done if they had come. We had only one way of summoning them and that was to shoot off distress rockets, but the rockets were four floors below. And even if they'd been right there in the gallery, I couldn't've opened a window to fire them. That night, I tended the light, but its flame was devouring our oxygen. The following day, we lay thirst-tormented, starving, waiting, waiting. And the following night, I again tended the light but the small supply of spare wicking we kept in the gallery had become exhausted and quite suddenly, about midnight, the light went out.

The sound of quietly **SQUEAKING** rats.

JEAN (narrates): Nothing I could do. The wicks were stored three levels below. Nothing I could do. Nothing. From time to time, I'd strike a match to see the clock.

Match STRIKES. Rats REACT.

JEAN (narrates): And when I did, it lit up the million red eyes about us. All about. Watching. Waiting. Below, it had grown quiet. They'd cleaned us out and now they too were waiting. All waiting. And then the rats -- quite suddenly -- were silent.

A long moment of SILENCE, followed by the distant sound of a CORNET playing a plaintive, mournful tune.

JEAN (narrates): And then, I heard it.

The TUNE continues.

JEAN (narrates): And then I saw the sky and the stars. The rats were gone. I went to the glass. Out there in the water, a small freighter -- a banana boat -- showing a few lights, came softly and innocently at us. The light was out. They didn't know. I wanted to open the windows to call out to them. To warn them somehow but -- I was afraid. What if-what if the rats were hiding from me? Tricking me? So I waited. She grounded very softly on a reef not two hundred yards from the key. Grounded so gently that the man playing the cornet -- was he a passenger or a crewman or watch? -- didn't even stop playing. They tried washing her back off. I could have told them to save their fuel. The tide was rising, would've floated her free. And I waited.

The cornet player hits a slightly SOUR NOTE and suddenly, all is SILENT for a long moment.

JEAN (narrates): That's all. That's the story. The sun came up and there wasn't a rat on the whole key. Every last one of that terrible army had left us, gone back to sea... on their new ship. Auguste? Insane asylum. He never recovered. Louis? They took him into Cayenne where he died of blood poisoning from his bite. (yawns) Oh, yes, well, that's the whole of it. And if you'll excuse me now, I must go set my traps. No, no. Mouse traps. No rats in this lighthouse, I should say not. Life in the lights isn't bad. But sometimes when I see a strange vessel approaching I get a little nervous, sure. Somewhere on the seas, there's a little banana boat without a crew. That is, without a human crew.

[END OF SHOW.]