

"The Fall of the House of Usher" -Abridged

By Edgar Allan Poe



DURING the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and found myself, as the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. With the first glimpse of the building, a sense of gloom pervaded my spirit. I looked upon the bleak walls —the vacant eye-like windows —a few rank sedges — and a few white trunks of decayed trees —with depression of soul. I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down —with a shudder —upon the inverted images of the gray sedge.

Describe the setting as the story begins.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting.

Who is the narrator going to visit?

A letter, however, had lately reached me — a letter from him. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness — of a mental disorder which oppressed him — and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady.

As boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. I had learned [though] the original title of the estate of the "House of Usher" seemed to include both the family and the family mansion.

When people refer to the house of Usher, they mean both...

I scanned more narrowly the building. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely

perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages. The carvings of the ceilings, the somber tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the armorial trophies which rattled as I strode were but matters to which I had been accustomed from my infancy. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Who else lives in this house besides Roderick Usher?

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! The now ghastly pallor of the skin startled me.

It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

Roderick's condition is a "family evil." What are his symptoms?

"I shall perish," said he, "I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. In this unnerved—in this pitiable condition—I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR."

I learned another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and, for many years, he had never ventured forth. He admitted, however, that much of the gloom which afflicted him could be traced to a more natural origin —to the severe and long-continued illness —of a tenderly beloved sister —his sole companion for long years —his last and only relative on earth. "Her decease," he said, "would leave him the last of the ancient race of the Ushers." While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. When a door closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother —but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis. I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her would probably be the last I should obtain —that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

What is Madeline's condition?

For several days, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself: and during this period I was busied to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together; or I listened to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly splendor.

What things did Roderick and the visitor do to help relieve Roderick's melancholy attitude?

What catches the narrator's eye?

I have spoken of that condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain stringed instruments. He thus confined himself upon the guitar. He accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered. The verses, which were entitled "The Haunted Palace," ran very nearly, if not accurately, thus:

I.

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace—
Radiant palace—reared its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion—
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

Notes on this stanza:

II.

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow;
(This—all this —was in the olden
Time long ago)
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odor went away.

Notes on this stanza:

III.

Wanderers in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Spirits moving musically
To a lute's well-tuned law,
Round about a throne, where sitting
(Porphyrogene!)
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen.

Notes on this stanza:

IV.

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing,
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.

Notes on this stanza:

V.

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;
(Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

Notes on this stanza:

VI.

And travellers
now within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows, see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh —but smile no more.

Notes on this stanza:

I well remember suggestions arising from this ballad —the gray stones of the home of his forefathers.

Our books were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works. [These books were about magic and mysticism.]

One evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight, in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The reason the brother had been led to his resolution [was because] of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of eager inquiries on the part of her medical men. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless precaution.

At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance. The [door's] immense weight caused an unusually sharp grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

What strange thing, do you the reader, find out about the Usher house?

We partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher murmured that the deceased and himself had been twins. Our glances,

however, rested not long upon the dead —for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had entombed the lady, had left, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

While assisting Roderick with Madeline's coffin, what does the narrator notice?

Some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret. At times, again, I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified —that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own superstitions.

It was upon retiring to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after the placing of the lady Madeline within the donjon, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavored to believe that much of what I felt was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room. There sat upon my heart alarm. Shaking this off with a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber, harkened to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence. I threw on my clothes with haste and endeavored to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen, by pacing rapidly to and fro through the apartment.

What sound catches the narrator's attention as he struggles to sleep?

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"And you have not seen it?" he said abruptly — "you have not then seen it? —but, stay! you shall." Thus speaking, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm. The fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet.

"Let us close this casement; —the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen; —and so we will pass away this terrible night together," [said the visitor].

What types of books do Roderick and the visitor read together?

The antique volume which I had taken up was the "Mad Trist" of Sir Lancelot. I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force. Here, it will be remembered, the words of the narrative run thus:

What book do Roderick and the narrator read to "pass away" the night together?

"And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who was of an obstinate and malicious turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood reverberated throughout the forest."

At the termination of this sentence I started, and for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came to my ears, what might have been the echo of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. It was the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention. I continued the story:

“But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the malicious hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend written —

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin;
Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win;

And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that the like was never before heard.”

Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement — for there could be no doubt I did actually hear a low and distant, but harsh and most unusual screaming or grating sound — the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described.

While reading the book aloud, what odd thing does the narrator notice?

Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the occurrence of this second coincidence, I retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting the nervousness of my companion. I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds in question; although a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes, taken place in his demeanor. From a position fronting my own, he had gradually brought round his chair, so as to sit with his face to the door; and I could but partially perceive his features. I resumed the narrative of Sir Launcelot, which thus proceeded:

“And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, thinking of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which fell upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound.”

No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than —as if a shield of brass had at the moment fallen heavily upon a floor of silver —I became aware of a metallic reverberation. Completely unnerved, I leaped to my feet; but the rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a stony rigidity. But, as I placed my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending closely over him, I at length drank in the hideous import of his words.

“Not hear it? —yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long —long —long —many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it —yet I dared not —oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! —I dared not —I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them

—many, many days ago —yet I dared not —I dared not speak! And now —to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield! —say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!" —here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul —"Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!"

Why is Roderick facing the door when the visitor reads the story?

What does Roderick admit they had done without the visitor knowing?

The huge panels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back. There did stand the enshrouded figure of Madeline. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro —then, with a moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

When Madeline enters alive, what does she immediately do?

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened — there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind —my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder —there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters —and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed over the "House of Usher."

How does "The Fall of the house of Usher" end?
