

The Fall of the House of Usher

During the whole of a dull, dark and silent day in the autumn of the year, I had travelled alone, on horseback, towards the House of Usher. As I came in sight of the place, my spirits sank; they grew as dark and dull as the sky above me, and as sad as the cold, grey walls of the building before my eyes. I did not know the reason for this feeling of extreme misery, unless it resulted from the general appearance of decay about the house, and about the grounds which surrounded it. There were the great dark windows, like black eyes in an empty face. The white trunks of lifeless trees stood out on the banks of a lake, whose still waters acted as a mirror to the scene above. The scene mirrored in the lake seemed even more sorrowful than the reality. In the end I gave up my attempts to solve the mystery of my anxiety. I left the lake, and went on to the house. The owner of the property, Roderick Usher, had been one of the closest of my childhood friends, but some years had passed since our last meeting. He had recently sent me a very urgent invitation to visit him — had begged me, in fact, to stay with him for several weeks. He wrote that he was suffering from a severe illness, a mental disorder. My companionship, he thought, would cheer him, and bring calm to his troubled thoughts. He was so sincere about all this, and much more, that I did not think twice; and here I was, at the House of Usher. Although, as boys, we had been the best of friends, I really knew little about Roderick Usher. I remembered that he had always been very quiet, and liked to keep himself apart from other people. His ancient family had been noted, through the centuries, for their sensitivity and imagination; and these had shown themselves in many great works of art and music. I knew, too, the very unusual fact that there were no branches to the family of Usher. The name and possessions had simply passed, without any interruption, from father to son. 'The House of Usher' meant, to the people of the area, not only the property but also the family. As I came near the great grey building, a strange idea took shape in my mind. I sensed that the air which surrounded the house was different from the rest of God's air. I felt that it came from the decayed trees, and the grey walls, and the silent lake — that the air itself was grey. It hung about the place like a cloud. I had some difficulty in throwing off this foolish thought. The house, now that I could see it clearly, looked extremely old. The building was still complete - I mean that no part of the stonework had fallen — but each separate stone was itself a powdery ruin of what it had once been. There were no other signs of weakness, except a long, narrow crack which ran from the roof right down the front of the house to the level of the ground. A servant took my horse, and I entered the hall. I was then led, in silence, through many dark and narrow passages to the master's room. Much that I noticed on the way had a strange effect on me, although I had been used all my life to surroundings such as these — the expensive furniture, the heavy curtains, the weapons and the rows of pictures on the walls. On one of the stairways, I met the family doctor, who seemed both confused and frightened by my presence. The room of my host, which I reached at last, was very large, high and dark, with a great deal of fine old furniture in it. Books and musical instruments lay scattered around, but somehow failed to give any life to the scene. I felt that I breathed an air of sorrow. Usher greeted me warmly. We sat down, and for some moments I looked at him with a feeling of great pity. Surely, no man had ever before changed so terribly, and in so short a time! He had always been pale — but never as pale as this. His eyes, always attractive, were now unnaturally large and bright; his thin lips had been reduced to a line on his face; the fine, soft hair now floated, uncut, like that of an old man, around his face and neck. The changed manner of my friend was equally striking. He was, all the time, in a state of high excitement or of great anxiety. As he passed quickly from one to the other of these conditions, his voice changed: the wild, high note would drop suddenly to a steady, careful sound, like the speech of a man who has drunk too much. It was in this way that he spoke of my visit, of his great desire to see me, and of the comfort that he expected me to bring him. He began a long description of his disease. It was, he said, a family evil, for which there seemed to be no cure — a simple nervous disorder, he added, which would doubtless soon pass. He suffered a great deal from a sharpness of the senses. He could eat only tasteless food, and wear only a certain kind of clothing. He could not bear the smell of flowers. The faintest light brought pain to his eyes; and he had forbidden all sounds in the house, except those from certain musical instruments. 'I am afraid of the future,' he said; 'not the events of the future, but their effect on me. I tremble at the thought of any, even the smallest, event which may increase my anxiety. I am not afraid of danger, except its most extreme effect — terror. In my weakened state I feel that the time will sooner or later arrive when I must give up life and reason together, in my personal struggle with Fear! It was a great shock to me to learn that he had not left the house for many years. 'The house,' he said, '— the actual walls and towers of the building - have gained an influence over me, a strange power that holds me to them, as if they were living creatures.' I did not know what answer to make to my friend. He admitted that much of the unhappiness which he suffered had a simple, and quite natural, origin. It was the long and severe illness of a greatly loved sister — his close companion

for many years — his last and only relative on earth. 'She will die very soon,' he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, 'and her death will leave me the last of the ancient family of Usher.' While he spoke, Lady Madeline (for that was her name) passed slowly through the room at the far end, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I watched her with a surprise and deep fear that I could not account for. As soon as she had gone, I turned to my friend. He had covered his face with his hands to hide a flood of tears. The disease of Lady Madeline had defeated the skill of her doctors, and she no longer cared whether she lived or died. A gradual but continuous loss of flesh caused a weakness of the body, which was made worse by the frequent stopping of the action of her heart. With great sorrow, my friend told me that there was little difference between these attacks and actual death. 'She will now have to remain in bed,' he said, 'and I do not think that you will see her alive again.' For several days following my arrival at the house, neither of us mentioned her name. During this time I made great efforts to comfort and cheer my friend. We painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the music which he played. We grew closer and closer in friendship, and shared our most secret thoughts. But it was all useless. Darkness continued to pour from his mind onto everything around us, in one endless flood of misery. I shall always remember the many sad hours I spent like this alone with the master of the House of Usher. But I cannot properly explain our studies and activities in words. He was a man of high beliefs which had become confused during his long illness. He could now express these beliefs and feelings only in colours and sound - in the wildest kind of painting, and in difficult music that he wrote himself. The results were not clear even to himself. It may be imagined how hard it was for me to understand them! I thought that in one of his pictures the idea was a little clearer, although I myself could not understand it. I have remembered that picture because it caused me to tremble as I looked at it. It showed a very long passage, with low walls, smooth and white. The background suggested that the passage was very far below the surface of the earth, but there was no way out of it that I could see. No lamps were shown, nor any other artificial light; but the whole scene was bathed in a flood of bright light. During one of our discussions, Usher told me that he believed all plants had the power of feeling. He also thought that even lifeless objects would have this power under certain conditions. As I have already mentioned, this belief was connected with the grey stones of his home. He thought that the way they were arranged in the walls, and had been arranged for hundreds of years, gave them a life of their own. The waters of the lake, too, and the dead trees, shared this life, he said. 'The proof,' he added, '— the proof of feeling in the walls and in the water — can be seen in the gradual but certain development of an air of their own about them.' I remembered my thoughts as I had come near the house, and I caught my breath. 'This air has had a silent and terrible influence on my family,' he said, 'and it has made me what I am.' One evening Usher informed me, in a few words, that Lady Madeline was dead. It was his intention, he said, to keep her body for two weeks, before burial, in one of the many rooms below the house. His reason for this decision was not unnatural, as he had taken into account the particular kind of disease from which she suffered. In plain words, he wished to be sure that she was really dead before he placed her body in the family grave. At the request of Usher, I helped him in making these arrangements. We two alone carried the body, in its box, to a small, dark room that lay below the part of the building where I myself slept. It had been used, in the troubled times of long ago, as a storeroom for gunpowder, or some other dangerous substance. Part of its floor, and the whole of a long passage through which we reached it, were lined with a red metal. The heavy iron door was protected in the same way. Having placed the box containing the body on a low table, we partly raised its lid and looked at the face inside. I immediately saw that brother and sister were exactly alike. Usher, guessing my thoughts, said that they had been twins, and that deep sympathies had always existed between them. There was a slight colour about her face and neck, and a faint smile — so terrible in death — on her lips. We did not look at her for long, but put back and nailed the lid, closed the iron door, and made our way back to the upper part of the house. It was after three or four days of bitter grief that I noticed a change in the manner of my friend. His ordinary activities - his music, books and painting — were forgotten. He wandered from room to room, doing nothing, interested in nothing. He grew paler than ever and the brightness left his eye. There were times when I thought that he had a secret to tell me, and that he lacked the courage to tell it. At other times he sat for hours, listening with great attention to some imaginary sound, as if expecting something unusual to happen. Is it any wonder that his condition filled me with fear — that I felt the wild influences of his own strange but impressive beliefs spreading to me? On the seventh or eighth night after the death of Lady Madeline, I experienced the full power of these feelings. For hours I lay awake, struggling against a sense of fear. I blamed my surroundings — the dusty furniture, the torn curtains which moved about in the wind of a rising storm, the ancient bed on which I lay. But my efforts were useless. At last, thoroughly afraid, I got up and looked as hard as I could into the darkness of the room. I heard — or thought that I heard - certain low sounds that came, from time to time, through the pauses in the storm. I

dressed quickly, since I was trembling; but whether with cold or fear, I do not know. To calm myself I walked quickly backwards and forwards across the room. I had done this two or three times when there was a gentle knock at my door and Usher entered, carrying a lamp. There was a look of crazy excitement in his eyes. 'And you have not seen it?' he cried suddenly. 'You have not — but, wait! You shall.' Saying this, and carefully shading his lamp, he hurried to one of the windows, and threw it open to the storm. The force of the wind that entered nearly lifted us from our feet. But it was not the wind that held our attention, nor the thick clouds that flew in all directions about the house. We had no view of the moon or stars. But the building, and all the objects around us — even the clouds above — were shining in a strange, unnatural light. This light poured from the walls and from the waters of the lake. 'You must not — you shall not look at this!' I said, as I led him from the window to a seat. 'This light, which troubles you, is just an electrical disturbance of the air and not uncommon. Let us close the window; the wind is cold and dangerous to your health. Here is one of your favourite books. I will read, and you shall listen; and so we shall pass this terrible night together.' I began to read, and Usher listened, or appeared to listen, with great attention. It was a well-known story by Sir Launcelot Canning. After I had been reading for eight or ten minutes, I reached the part where the chief character forces his way into the home of his enemy. At this point the story goes on as follows: 'And Ethelred lifted his sword, and struck the door with heavy blows. He cracked, and broke, and tore it apart, so that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood seemed to fill the forest.' At the end of this sentence I paused. I thought that I could hear, though faintly, just such a noise, like breaking wood. It seemed to come from some distant part of the house. It must have been, I believed, some damage caused by the storm; and I decided immediately that there was nothing in it to interest or worry me. I continued the story: 'Then the good Ethelred, entering through the door, was surprised to find a terrible creature standing guard in front of a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and on the wall hung a great shining shield. There, on the shield, these words were written: 'He who enters here, has won a victory; He who kills the guard, shall win the shield.' 'And Ethelred lifted his sword again, and struck the head of the creature, which died with cries so wild and terrible that they shook the walls. The metal shield then crashed to the floor at Ethelred's feet.' Here again I felt afraid, and was forced to stop my reading. There was now no doubt at all that I did actually hear a faint, but clear cry of pain. It was closely followed by the distant sounds of metal being struck. I was not sure that Usher had himself heard these sounds, and I rushed, trembling, to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were fixed on the door; his lips were moving; and, as I bent over him, I heard the words. 'Do I hear it? — Yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long - long long — for many minutes, many hours, many days, I have heard it - but I dared not — oh, pity me, miserable creature that I am! — I dared not speak! We have put her living in that box! Did I not tell you that my senses were sharp? I now tell you that I heard her first movements many days ago — but I dared not speak. And now — tonight — Ethelred — ha! ha! — the breaking of the door, and the death cry of the creature, and the crashing of the shield! - Say, instead, the forcing of the box, and her cries and struggles in the metal passage of her prison! Oh where shall I hide? Will she not soon be here? Is she not hurrying to punish me for my speed in burying her? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Can I not feel the heavy beating of her heart? Crazy fool!' - here he jumped to his feet, and shouted the words — 'CRAZY FOOL! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS OUTSIDE THE DOOR!' As if in the force of his voice there was some special power, the great door opened. It was the work of the rushing wind - but then, outside the door, there did stand the tall, white clothed figure of. Lady Madeline of Usher, covered in blood from some terrible struggle. For a moment she remained trembling in the doorway; then, with a low cry, she fell heavily inward onto her brother. The shock brought death to Usher immediately, and a moment later his sister died beside him. I ran from that room and from that house in fear; and I did not look back until I had passed the lake. A great noise filled the air. As I watched, the crack — the crack that I have spoken of, that ran from the roof of the building to the ground — widened like the jaws of some terrible creature. The great walls broke apart. There was a sound like the voice of a thousand waters, and then the deep, dark lake closed over the ruins of the House of Usher.