

ALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER by Edgar Allan Poe. Son coeur eson luth suspendu; Sitôt qu'on le touche il resonance. DE BERANGER. 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, as it were, sleeping alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was--but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me--upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain--upon the bleak walls--upon the vacant eye-like windows--upon a few rank sedges--and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees--with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium--the bitter lapse into everyday life--the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart--an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it--I paused to think--what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down--but with a shudder even more thrilling than before--upon the remodelled and inverted images of the grey sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows. 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 boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country--a letter from him--which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS gave evidence of nervous agitation. 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 indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said--it was the apparent heart that went with his request--which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons. Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognisable beauties of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other--it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher"--an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion. I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment--that of looking down into the tarn--had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition--or why should I not so term it?--served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy--a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity--an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn--a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. 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 massive masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. 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. Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A vaulted, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the object around me--while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebony blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy--while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this--I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The vault 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 as to vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remote angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortable, 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. Upon my entrance, Usher rose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, at first thought, of an overdone cordiality--of the constrained effort of the ennuye man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance, convinced me of his perfect sincerity. 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! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the man being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely-moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity--these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculously lustrous of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been so altered, not even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity. In the manner of his friend I was at once struck with an incoherence--an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual repugnance--an excess--ter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sultry, and his utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement. It was thus that he seemed to find a remedy--a mere nervous affection, he immediately added of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and he shuddered with horror. To an anomalous species of terror I found him to be not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation--in this pitiable condition--I feel that the period will soon arrive, when, moreover, at intervals, and through superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling, a supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shameful family mansion, had, by dint of long suffering, hardened into which they all looked down, had, at length, the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be evidently approaching dissolution--of a ten years, with a bitterness which I can never forget, "lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed, regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread--and yet I found steps. When a door, at length, close his hands, and I could only perceive his tears. The disease of the lady Madeline, and had not been herself finally to bed; but, on the request although her transient affections of a partially cataleptic character, pressure of her malady, and had not been herself finally to bed; but, on the her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) the of her person would thus probably be the last I should ob tain--that the days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together; or I listen ar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the fulfilment of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom. I shall ever bear about me a memory of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly dist ng improvised dirges will ring for ever in my ears. Among other thin d amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the p h grew, touch by touch, into vagueness at which I shuddered the mo m these paint ing s (vivid as the their images now a re b efore me) ortion which s ho uld lie within the compass of merely written words s, he arrested, and overawed attention. If ever mortal al painted a --in the circumstance s then surrounding me--the re arose o ntr ived to throw up on his canvas, an intensit y of intole odration of t he certain ly glowing yet t oo concret y of the sp ebl y, in w ord s. A small picture presented the inter io r of an i ey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth b el ow the rtion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source o f light w ghout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate spl en dour. I ory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the excepti rhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, w acter of the performance s. But the fervid f acility of his improvisations could re, in the notes, as well as in the w ords of his wild fantasies (for h verb al improv isa tions), the re su lt of that intense m ental co y all uded as ob servable only i n p articular momen ts of the h aps odies I have easily rememb ered. I was, perhaps, th e more der or mystic cur rent of its meaning, I fancied that I p erceive d, of t he tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. The verses acc urately, thus: I. In the greenest of ou r valleys, By good angels tena d, and f , which , O d. In the mon arch thou ght's dominion -- It stood there! Ne ver sera ph spre a s, golden. On its ro of did float and flo w; (This--all thi s-- was in t h e olden e y, a long the ramparts plumed a nd pallid, A wing ed odour da w s s aw Spirits moving musically T o a lute's well tun ed law, R oun d abo un glow ing Wa s st e ng. The ruler of the realm was seen. IV. A nd all with pea rl and rub y sing, ing voi e s o s, i parking evermore. A troop of Echo es whose sweet duty Was but to sh ed and bloom'd is but a dim-remember'd story, Of the old time entomb'd. VI. fantastically To a discordant melody; While, like a rapid ghastly river, Through t from this ballad, led us into a train of thought wherein there became manifest a tinity with which he maintained it. This opinion, in its general form, was th at, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorgan s connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home n of these stones--in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of th eir endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still wa he spoke,) in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of horri nd terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his famil Our books--the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the me We pored together over such works as the Vervet et Chartrreuse of Gresset; the Belphegor the Chirromancy of Robert Flud, of Jean D'Indagine, and of De la Chambre; the Journey into the Blue Distance o f the Directorium Inquisitorium, by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Me ef delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic--the manual o inking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having inf ertnight, (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly re er had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of ce al-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the s y no means an unnatural, precaution. At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary ent een so long unopposed that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmos here, gave us little opportunity for investigati the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst pu of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. on its hinges. Having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the de ceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely inte d not long upon the dead--for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entomb'd the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptic charac usly 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, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apart ments of the upper portion of the house. And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue--but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quav into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, 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 slo eep came not near my couch--while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavoured to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room--of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber, hearkened--I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit pr ept me--to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence. Overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror, unaccountable yet unendurable, I threw on my clothes with haste (for I felt that I should sleep no mo e during the night,) and endeavoured to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen, by pacing rapidly to and fro through the apartment. I had taken but few turns in this manner, when a light step on an adjoining staircase arrested my attention. I presently recog nized it as that of Usher. In an instant afterwards he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan--but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes--an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanour. His air appalled me--but anything was preferable to the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief. "And you have not seen it?" he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence--"You have not then seen it?--but, stay! you shall." Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm. The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of t e house) did not prevent our perceiving the lifelike velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this--yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars--nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung a e they have their ghestly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement--the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favourite romances. I will read, and you shall listen;--and so we will pass away this terrible night together." The antique volu e which I had taken up was the "Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning; but I had called it a favourite of Usher's more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand; and I indulged a vague hope that the excitement which now agitated the hypochondriac, might find relief (for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies) even in the extremeness of the folly which I should read. Could I have judged, indeed, by the wild overstrained air of vivacity with which he hearkened, or apparently hearkened, to the words of the tale, I might well have congratulated myself upon the success of my design. I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethel red, 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: "And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and malicious turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue--but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quav into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified--that it infected me. 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