



The Fall of the House of Usher

Part One

IT WAS A DARK AND SOUNDLESS day near the end of the year, and clouds were hanging low in the heavens. All day I had been riding on **horseback** through country with little life or beauty; and in the early evening I came within view of the House of Usher.

I do not know how it was — but, with my first sight of the building, a sense of heavy sadness filled my spirit. I looked at the scene before me — at the house itself — at the ground around it — at the cold stone walls of the building — at its empty eye-like windows — and at a few dead trees — I looked at this scene, I say, with a complete sadness of soul which was no healthy, **earthly** feeling. There was a **coldness**, a **sickening** of the heart, in which I could discover nothing to **lighten** the weight I felt. What was it, I asked myself, what was it that was so **fearful**, so **frightening** in my view of the House of Usher? This was a question to which I could find no answer.

I stopped my horse beside the building, on the edge of a dark and quiet lake. There, I could see reflected in the water a clear picture of the dead trees, and of the house and its empty eye-like windows.



I was now going to spend several weeks in this house of sadness — this house of **gloom**. Its owner was named Roderick Usher. We had been friends when we were boys; but many years had passed since our last meeting. A letter from him had reached me, a wild letter which demanded that I reply by coming to see him. He wrote of an illness of the body — of a sickness of the mind — and of a desire to see me — his best and indeed his only friend. It was the manner in which all this was said — it was the heart in it — which did not allow me to say no.

Although as boys we had been together, I really knew little about my friend. I knew, however, that his family, a very old one, had long been famous for its understanding of all the arts and for many quiet acts of kindness to the poor. I had learned too that the family had never been a large one, with many branches. The name had passed always from father to son, and when people spoke of the “House of Usher,” they included both the family and the family home.

I again looked up from the picture of the house reflected in the lake to the house itself. A strange idea grew in my mind — an idea so strange that I tell it only to show the force of the feelings which laid their weight on me. I really believed that around the whole house, and the ground around it, the air itself was different. It was not the air of heaven. It rose from the dead, **decaying** trees, from the gray walls, and the quiet lake. It was a **sickly, unhealthy** air that I could see, slow-moving, heavy, and gray.

Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I looked more carefully at the building itself. The most **noticeable** thing about it seemed to be its great age. None of the walls had fallen, yet the stones appeared to be in a condition of advanced **decay**. Perhaps the careful eye would have discovered the beginning of a break in the front of the building, a crack making its way from the top down the wall until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake.

I rode over a short bridge to the house. A man who worked in the house — a **servant** — took my horse, and I entered. Another servant, of quiet step, led me without a word through many dark **turnings** to the room of his master. Much that I met on the way added, I do not know how, to the **strangeness** of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me — the dark wall **coverings**, the blackness of the floors, and the things brought home from long forgotten wars —

while these things were like the things I had known since I was a baby — while I admitted that all this was only what I had expected — I was still surprised at the strange ideas which grew in my mind from these simple things.

The room I came into was very large and high. The windows were high, and pointed at the top, and so far above the black floor that they were quite out of reach. Only a little light, red in color, made its way through the glass, and served to lighten the nearer and larger objects. My eyes, however, tried and failed to see into the far, high corners of the room. Dark coverings hung upon the walls. The many chairs and tables had been used for a long, long time. Books lay around the room, but could give it no sense of life. I felt sadness hanging over everything. No escape from this deep cold gloom seemed possible.

As I entered the room, Usher stood up from where he had been lying and met me with a **warmth** which at first I could not believe was real. A look, however, at his face told me that every word he spoke was true.

We sat down; and for some moments, while he said nothing, I looked at him with a feeling of sad surprise. Surely, no man had ever before changed as Roderick Usher had! Could this be the friend of my early years? It is true that his face had always been unusual. He had gray-white skin; eyes large and full of light; lips not bright in color, but of a beautiful shape; a **well-shaped** nose; hair of great softness — a face that was not easy to forget. And now the increase in this strangeness of his face had caused so great a change that I almost did not know him. The horrible white of his skin, and the strange light in his eyes, surprised me and even made me afraid. His hair had been allowed to grow, and in its softness it did not fall around his face but seemed to lie upon the air. I could not, even with an effort, see in my friend the appearance of a simple human being.

In his manner, I saw at once, changes came and went; and I soon found that this resulted from his attempt to quiet a very great **nervousness**. I had indeed been prepared for something like this, partly by his letter and partly by remembering him as a boy. His actions were first too quick and then too quiet. Sometimes his voice, slow and **trembling** with fear, quickly changed to a strong, heavy, carefully spaced, too perfectly controlled manner. It was in this manner that he

spoke of the purpose of my visit, of his desire to see me, and of the deep **delight** and strength he expected me to give him. He told me what he believed to be the nature of his illness. It was, he said, a family sickness, and one from which he could not hope to grow better — but it was, he added at once, only a nervous illness which would without doubt soon pass away. It showed itself in a number of strange feelings. Some of these, as he told me of them, interested me but were beyond my understanding; perhaps the way in which he told me of them added to their strangeness. He suffered much from a sickly increase in the feeling of all the senses; he could eat only the most tasteless food; all flowers smelled too strongly for his nose; his eyes were hurt by even a little light; and there were few sounds which did not fill him with horror. A certain kind of sick fear was completely his master.

“I shall die,” he said. “I shall die! I must die of this **fool’s** sickness. In this way, this way and no other way, I shall be lost. I fear what will happen in the future, not for what happens, but for the result of what happens. I have, indeed, no fear of pain, but only fear of its result — of terror! I feel that the time will soon arrive when I must lose my life, and my mind, and my soul, together, in some last battle with that horrible enemy: FEAR!”



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Part Two

RODERICK USHER, WHOM I HAD known as a boy, was now ill and had asked me to come to help him. When I arrived I felt something strange and fearful about the great old stone house, about the lake in front of it, and about Usher himself. He appeared not like a human being, but like a spirit that had come back from beyond the **grave**. It was an illness, he said, from which he would surely die. He called his sickness fear. "I have," he said, "no fear of pain, but only the fear of its result — of terror. I feel that the time will soon arrive when I must lose my life, and my mind, and my soul, together, in some last battle with that horrible enemy: FEAR!"

I learned also, but slowly, and through broken words with doubtful meaning, another strange fact about the condition of Usher's mind. He had certain sick fears about the house in which he lived, and he had not stepped out of it for many years. He felt that the house, with its gray walls and the quiet lake around it, had somehow through the long years gotten a strong hold on his spirit.



He said, however, that much of the gloom which lay so heavily on him was probably caused by something more **plainly** to be seen — by the **long-continued** illness — indeed, the coming death — of a **dearly** loved sister — his only company for many years. Except for himself, she was the last member of his family on earth. “When she dies,” he said, with a sadness which I can never forget, “when she dies, I will be the last of the old, old family — the House of Usher.”

While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so she was called) passed slowly through a distant part of the room, and without seeing that I was there, went on. I looked at her with a complete and wondering surprise and with some fear — and yet I found I could not explain to myself such feelings. My eyes followed her. When she came to a door and it closed behind her, my eyes turned to the face of her brother — but he had put his face in his hands, and I could see only that the thin fingers through which his tears were flowing were whiter than ever before.

The illness of the lady Madeline had long been beyond the help of her doctors. She seemed to care about nothing. Slowly her body had grown thin and weak, and often for a short period she would fall into a sleep like the sleep of the dead. So far she had not been forced to stay in bed; but by the evening of the day I arrived at the house, the power of her **destroyer** (as her brother told me that night) was too strong for her. I learned that my one sight of her would probably be the last I would have — that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days following, her name was not spoken by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busy with efforts to lift my friend out of his sadness and gloom. We painted and read together; or listened, as if in a dream, to the wild music he played. And so, as a warmer and more loving friendship grew between us, I saw more clearly the **uselessness** of all attempts to bring happiness to a mind from which only darkness came, spreading upon all objects in the world its **never-ending** gloom.

I shall always remember the hours I spent with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I would fail in any attempt to give an idea of the true character of the things we did together. There was a strange light over everything. The paintings which he made made me **tremble**,

though I know not why. To tell of them is beyond the power of written words. If ever a man painted an idea, that man was Roderick Usher. For me at least there came out of his pictures a sense of fear and wonder.

One of these pictures may be told, although **weakly**, in words. It showed the inside of a room where the dead might be placed, with low walls, white and **plain**. It seemed to be very deep under the earth. There was no door, no window; and no light or fire burned; yet a river of light flowed through it, filling it with a horrible, **ghastly** brightness.

I have spoken of that **sickly** condition of the senses, which made most music painful for Usher to hear. The notes he could listen to with pleasure were very few. It was this fact, perhaps, that made the music he played so different from most music. But the wild beauty of his playing could not be explained.

The words of one of his songs, called "The Haunted **Palace**," I have easily remembered. In it I thought I saw, and for the first time, that Usher knew very well that his mind was **weakening**. This song told of a great house where a king lived — a palace — in a green valley, where all was light and color and beauty, and the air was sweet. In the palace were two bright windows through which people in that happy valley could hear music and could see smiling ghosts — spirits — moving around the king. The palace door was of the richest materials, in red and white; through it came other spirits whose only duty was to sing in their beautiful voices about how wise their king was.

But a dark change came, the song continued, and now those who enter the valley see through the windows, in a red light, shapes that move to broken music; while through the door, now colorless, a ghastly river of ghosts, laughing but no longer smiling, rushes out forever.

Our talk of this song led to another strange idea in Usher's mind. He believed that plants could feel and think, and not only plants, but rocks and water as well. He believed that the gray stones of his house, and the small plants growing on the stones, and the decaying trees, had a power over him that made him what he was.

Our books — the books which, for years, had fed the sick man's mind — were, as might be supposed, of this same wild character. Some of these books Usher sat and studied for hours. His chief delight was found in reading one very old book, written for some forgotten church, telling of the Watch over the Dead.

At last, one evening he told me that the lady Madeline was alive no more. He said he was going to keep her body for a time in one of the many **vaults** inside the walls of the building. The **worldly** reason he gave for this was one with which I felt I had to agree. He had decided to do this because of the nature of her illness, because of the strange interest and questions of her doctors, and because of the great distance to the **graveyard** where members of his family were placed in the earth.

We two carried her body to its resting place. The vault in which we placed it was small and dark, and in ages past it must have seen strange and bloody scenes. It lay deep below that part of the building where I myself slept. The thick door was of iron, and because of its great weight made a loud, hard sound when it was opened and closed.

As we placed the lady Madeline in this room of horror I saw for the first time the great **likeness** between brother and sister, and Usher told me then that they were twins — they had been born on the same day. For that reason the understanding between them had always been great, and the tie that held them together very strong.

We looked down at the dead face one last time, and I was filled with wonder. As she lay there, the lady Madeline looked not dead but asleep — still soft and warm — though to the touch cold as the stones around us.



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Part Three

I WAS VISITING AN OLD FRIEND of mine, Roderick Usher, in his old stone house, his palace, where a feeling of death hung on the air. I saw how fear was pressing on his heart and mind. Now his only sister, the lady Madeline, had died and we had put her body in its resting place, in a room inside the cold walls of the palace, a **damp**, dark vault, a fearful place. As we looked down upon her face, I saw that there was a strong likeness between the two. "Indeed," said Usher, "we were born on the same day, and the tie between us has always been strong."



We did not long look down at her, for fear and wonder filled our hearts. There was still a little color in her face and there seemed to be a smile on her lips. We closed the heavy iron door and returned to the rooms above, which were hardly less **gloomy** than the vault.

And now a change came in the sickness of my friend's mind. He went from room to room with a **hurried** step. His face was, if possible, whiter and more ghastly than before, and the light in his eyes had

gone. The **trembling** in his voice seemed to show the greatest fear. At times he sat looking at nothing for hours, as if listening to some sound I could not hear. I felt his condition, slowly but certainly, gaining power over me; I felt that his wild ideas were becoming fixed in my own mind.

As I was going to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after we placed the lady Madeline within the vault, I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep did not come — while the hours passed. My mind fought against the nervousness. I tried to believe that much, if not all, of what I felt was due to the gloomy room, to the dark wall coverings, which in a rising wind moved on the walls. But my efforts were **useless**. A trembling I could not stop filled my body, and fear without reason caught my heart. I sat up, looking into the darkness of my room, listening — I do not know why — to certain low sounds which came when the storm was quiet. A feeling of horror lay upon me like a heavy weight. I put on my clothes and began walking **nervously** around the room.

I had been walking for a very short time when I heard a light step coming toward my door. I knew it was Usher. In a moment I saw him at my door, as usual very white, but there was a wild laugh in his eyes. Even so, I was glad to have his company. “And have you not seen it?” he said. He **hurried** to one of the windows and opened it to the storm.

The force of the entering wind nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a **stormy** but beautiful night, and **wildly** strange. The heavy, **low-hanging** clouds which seemed to press down upon the house, flew from all directions against each other, always returning and never passing away in the distance. With their great thickness they cut off all light from the moon and the stars. But we could see them because they were lighted from below by the air itself, which we could see, rising from the dark lake and from the stones of the house itself.

“You must not — you shall not look out at this!” I said to Usher, as I led him from the window to a seat. “This appearance which surprises you so has been seen in other places, too. Perhaps the lake is the cause. Let us close this window; the air is cold. Here is one of the stories you like best. I will read and you shall listen and thus we will live through this fearful night together.”

The old book which I had picked up was one written by a fool for fools to read, and it was not, in truth, one that Usher liked. It was, however, the only one within easy reach. He seemed to listen quietly. Then I came to a part of the story in which a man, a strong man full of wine, begins to break down a door, and the sound of the dry wood as it breaks can be heard through all the forest around him.

Here I stopped, for it seemed to me that from some very distant part of the house sounds came to my ears like those of which I had been reading. It must have been this likeness that had made me notice them, for the sounds themselves, with the storm still increasing, were nothing to stop or interest me.

I continued the story, and read how the man, now entering through the broken door, discovers a strange and terrible animal of the kind so often found in these old stories. He strikes it and it falls, with such a cry that he has to close his ears with his hands. Here again I stopped.

There could be no doubt. This time I did hear a distant sound, very much like the cry of the animal in the story. I tried to control myself so that my friend would see nothing of what I felt. I was not certain that he had heard the sound, although he had clearly changed in some way. He had slowly moved his chair so that I could not see him well. I did see that his lips were moving as if he were speaking to himself. His head had dropped forward, but I knew he was not asleep, for his eyes were open and he was moving his body from side to side.

I began reading again, and quickly came to a part of the story where a heavy piece of iron falls on a stone floor with a ringing sound. These words had just passed my lips when I heard clearly, but from far away, a loud ringing sound — as if something of iron had indeed fallen heavily upon a stone floor, or as if an iron door had closed.

I lost control of myself completely, and jumped up from my chair. Usher still sat, moving a little from side to side. His eyes were turned to the floor. I rushed to his chair. As I placed my hand on his shoulder, I felt that his whole body was trembling; a sickly smile touched his lips; he spoke in a low, quick, and nervous voice as if he did not know I was there.

“Yes!” he said. “I heard it! Many minutes, many hours, many days have I heard it — but I did not **dare** to speak! We have put her living in the vault! Did I not say that my senses were too strong? I heard her first movements many days ago — yet I did not dare to speak! And now, that story — but the sounds were hers! Oh, where shall I run?! She is coming — coming to ask why I put her there too soon. I hear her **footsteps** on the stairs. I hear the heavy beating of her heart.” Here he jumped up and cried as if he were giving up his soul: “I TELL YOU, SHE NOW STANDS AT THE DOOR!!”

The great door to which he was pointing now slowly opened. It was the work of the rushing wind, perhaps — but no — outside that door a shape did stand, the tall figure, in its **grave-clothes**, of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white dress, and the signs of her terrible efforts to escape were upon every part of her thin form. For a moment she remained trembling at the door; then, with a low cry, she fell heavily in upon her brother; in her pain, as she died at last, she carried him down with her, down to the floor. He too was dead, killed by his own fear.

I rushed from the room; I rushed from the house. I ran. The storm was around me in all its strength as I crossed the bridge. Suddenly a wild light moved along the ground at my feet, and I turned to see where it could have come from, for only the great house and its darkness were behind me. The light was that of the full moon, of a blood-red moon, which was now **shining** through that break in the front wall, that crack which I thought I had seen when I first saw the palace. Then only a little crack, it now **widened** as I watched. A strong wind came rushing over me — the whole face of the moon appeared. I saw the great walls falling apart. There was a long and stormy shouting sound — and the deep black lake closed darkly over all that remained of the HOUSE OF USHER.