

The Fall of the House of Usher

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 house¹, 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 gotten² 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 on³. 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 grown⁴ thin and weak*, and often for a short period* she would fall⁵ 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 useless-

ness* 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 made⁶ 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"*⁷, 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 light⁷, shapes that move to broken music; while⁸ 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 worldly⁹ 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.