



Edgar  
Allan Poe

MYSTERY TALES

  
GIUNTI CLASSICS

  
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EDGAR ALLAN POE

# Mystery Tales

Edited with an Introduction by  
Luciana Pirè

 **GIUNTI**

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## *Introduction*

Edgar Allan Poe pursued a solitary way. As a man, he was destined to lead a tragic life; as an artist, he was doomed almost from the start and suffered neglect and abuse in his lifetime. His romantic nihilism was not at home in the culture of his times; his genius was for negativity and opposition, reacting against his age and writing in spite of it. He believed in a world of dreams, but he thoroughly disbelieved in any possibility of its realization. Everything related to his short unhappy life must have confirmed this attitude in him.

On 19 January 1809 he was born in Boston, the son of a pair of travelling actors. When his irresponsible father disappeared and his mother died of tuberculosis at twenty-four, he was adopted by John Allan, a prosperous tobacco merchant in Richmond, Virginia. Poe was raised to be a gentleman and took for granted advantages he was soon to be deprived of. By choice, he took Allan as his middle name and always emphasized his Southern background.

He had a period of schooling in England, and a year at the University of Virginia. However, instead of making profitable use of his studies, he learned to play cards, and soon owed money to merchants who had given him credit. When Allan refused to pay his 'debts of honour', Poe absconded to Boston and, under a new identity, began his literary career. Even though he could scarcely afford one night's lodging, he published three volumes of verse at his own expense. Then, seeing a comfortable future on an officer's pay, he enlisted in the army and enrolled at West Point, but he deliberately violated Academy regulations and earned a prompt dismissal. It was a crucial moment for him. The humiliating letters he had to write to his foster-father asking for financial support received no answer. By that time, Allan, whose wife had died, had already remarried thus leaving Poe no hope of a legacy. The penniless young orphan tried to make his own way in his precarious career as professional author. There would certainly be no parents in the tales he was to write.

Poe spent his adult life in American literary capitals that provide the urban context and the developing image of its human landscape

in *The Man of the Crowd* (1840), one of his major achievements as a painter of modern life. He lived in Baltimore and in Richmond, where he was employed as assistant editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Having contributed very little to the first issue of the magazine, he offered the editor-in-chief his longest and most ambitious tale, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), a romance of a fantastic voyage through the South Seas, culminating in the Antarctic; a voyage marked by endless catastrophes, including a particularly grisly instance of cannibalism. It was a failure at that time. Fired from the *Messenger* early in 1837 he moved first to New York and then to Philadelphia, where he worked at editing the popular monthly *Graham's Magazine*.

Thus Poe entered the world of journalism bringing new life to the literary magazines of America and despising the sensationalism that had become popular in American journals. Later he parodied that fashionable way of writing in a burlesque entitled *How to Write a Blackwood Article* (1842), where an editor advises a certain Miss Psyche Zenobia to "pay minute attention to the sensations"; consequently, she writes an account of her own decapitation, continuing to chatter after losing her head!

While he was editor, he performed enormous editorial labours for ridiculously small salaries. Furthermore, due to the fact that his controversial reviews and unflattering critiques alienated many of his friends, he resigned from *Graham's* in 1842 and tried unsuccessfully to found a journal of his own. These years of financial troubles saw the freelance publication of some of his most famous tales, but they also established the pattern of his miserable diet and the habit of drinking that eventually brought him to an early grave.

What all of us generally remember about Poe's irregular life is that he married his first cousin, Virginia Clemm, before she turned fourteen. Modern biographers have attempted to prove that theirs was a brother-sister relationship. Nothing could be further from the truth. Poe was very much in love with his wife, and at least one observer noted that Virginia kissed him so passionately in public that he found it embarrassing. She had a beautiful voice and was trained as a singer. However, she burst a blood vessel in her throat and sank, spitting blood, into a state of prostration. In January 1847 she died, not yet twenty.

Despite his grief, Poe proposed marriage to the widowed poet Sarah Helen Whitman the year after Virginia's death. The lady's doubts might have been caused by rumours of Poe's taste for alcohol, a vice that taxed his capacities, both physical and financial. When he was affected by alcohol, the suppressed rage that he felt for what he considered the injustices of an insensitive world expressed itself in vituperation and violence which often ended in quarrels. In any event,

this marriage did not take place, nor did he survive to marry another widow, his childhood sweetheart Elmira Royster Shelton. He had also flirted with Nancy Richmond and, in a desperate letter to her, he wrote he had tried to commit suicide by taking laudanum.

Those were days when opium was frequently given in small doses for pain, and Poe may well have taken it for that purpose. In a fit of depression he obtained a certain amount and, on the morning of September 28th 1849 he went to a doctor's office in Baltimore, noticeably intoxicated. He was just forty when he was found dying in a gutter. He was taken to the hospital where he remained delirious, speaking to imaginary objects on the walls. He died on October 7.

The controversy which had run throughout his life outlasted his death, for his literary executor and most invidious enemy, the Reverend Rufus Griswold, maliciously portrayed him as a depraved, neurotic and immoral figure. His "abominable lies" went unexposed for many years, poisoning every biographer's image of Poe.

Poe's greatest desire was to be known as a poet, the American Coleridge or Byron, and his poetry echoes those English Romantic forerunners. Whatever his early ambitions, fame in this direction was slow to come. Poe wrote relatively little verse, with the exception of the long prose poem *Eureka* (1848), which sets forth a vision of the entire cosmos, in its origins, its workings, and its eventual apocalypse. What this poem asserts is the "unified" body of external nature beyond both the spatial and temporal limits of human perception. Some of his poems, like the famous literary ballad *The Raven* (1845), are remarkable for their deliberate avoidance of conventional language and their insistent musicality. In his seminal essay, *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846), the poet demonstrated the manner in which he wrote and how we should read this poem.

When he discovered that poetry could not fulfil the high aims he had conceived for it, Poe turned to the writing of short stories. His first tale, *Metzengerstein*, a horrific account of castles and curses, appeared in 1832; and, in 1833, he won a fifty-dollar prize in a story contest with *MS Found in a Bottle*, a grim tale of death at sea. He became the first American to interpret the short story as an art form, tightly compressed and full of that kind of tension that is characteristic of poetry. In Poe's view, a tale was like a poem in that it did not deal with ordinary life: its range was the limitless reach of the imagination into the mysteries of existence. The popularity and influence of Poe's tales have been and remain immense; they represent a permanent part of Western literary culture.

The bulk of his work is in criticism and tale-telling. In his first collection of short stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1839),

Poe used the term *arabesque* possibly as a tribute to *The Arabian Nights*; while grotesque signifies the depiction of monsters as they spring from the free enterprise of the imagination and intuition, unobstructed by the presence of the moral dimension. On examination, the two modes do not seem mutually exclusive but appear, somehow, easily intertwined. In 1845 he published another collection, *Tales*, which had great difficulty in catching the American public's attention. "I shall never compose anything again", he radically claimed. Of course, we cannot take that statement very seriously. From 1832 to 1849, in a relatively short space of time, Poe published almost seventy tales in several styles, which we may roughly divide into two categories: mystery-detective and Gothic horror stories.

Had Poe created no other character than Monsieur Auguste Dupin, he would be remembered in literary history for his portrayal of the prototype for Sherlock Holmes. Faced with a difficult crime or puzzle, the analytical intellect of Dupin, an erudite French gentleman who interests himself in crime and works by association. In all three of the stories in which he appears he can reach simple yet ingenious conclusions by avoiding conventional mental operations. He accomplishes what the authorities are unable to accomplish.

That which gives Dupin a clue to the true nature of the murderer of two women in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) is exactly what prompts the police to claim the mystery cannot be solved, namely "the *outré* character of his features". Dupin discovers in the unusual an aid to the solution: the murderer is not a human being, but an orang-outang brought ashore by a seaman returned from Borneo. After the brilliant performance in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the Prefect of Parisian Police requests his help in solving the case of a girl whose body was found floating in the Seine (*The Mystery of Marie Roget*, 1842). Without leaving his study, Dupin is able to reconstruct as an intellectual exercise the murderer's frame of mind. He explains, step by step, his method of analysis to the Prefect of Police, whom he handles as a foolish child from the start. Such reasoning, for Poe, is man's highest power.

The rational explanation of method is also an intrinsic part in *The Purloined Letter* (1845), a tale which sets the pattern that all private eye stories have followed since. The much sought letter of the title, incriminating a woman of social prominence, is obviously stolen from her apartment by the Minister D., who has been blackmailing the lady, and who, by means of its possession, has in effect seized control of the government. Most men would hide a letter which the police are looking for, but only an imaginative one could have conceived the sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all. It was simply left, under the Prefect's nose, in a card-rack as if it were not import-



ant. Poe called his detective stories “tales of ratiocination” because of meticulous attention to the rational process by which mysteries are unravelled. Whether or not we allow Poe the merit of having invented the modern short story, he most certainly did invent the detective story and was the principal exponent of its vogue in America.

Whereas the detective stories are developed with meticulous regard for rational credibility, the reverse commonly occurs in the tales of terror. Take *Berenice* (1835), for example, in which the narrator speaks of the “inversion” that took place in his mind where the realities of the world seemed to him visionary, “while ideas of the land of dreams” made up his everyday existence. The lunatic lover and dentist digs up the body of his cousin Berenice, wasted by her disease, and tears out the teeth from her jaws, bringing home in a small box the thirty-two ivory treasures and the realization that Berenice had been buried alive. At the end of the story, we realize that nothing at all may have happened in a conventional sense – other than in the completely deranged mind of the narrator. This could be said about all of Poe’s tales of horror. Stories like *Ligeia* (1838), regarded by the author as his best tale, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) still fascinate us because of the author’s skilful mixing of natural and supernatural events.

His conception of an ideal beauty to be worshipped made him assert that the death of a beautiful woman is the perfect theme in both poems and tales. This motif is stated unequivocally in a later tale, *The Oval Portrait* (1845), in which an artist-husband is able to endow his painting with life. But the touch that completes the portrait of his beautiful wife transfers the glow of life from her cheek to that of her image, and she dies. By painting her perfect likeness, his artwork outlives its subject. The need to destroy the beloved woman develops from the betrayal of the ideal with which she has been invested. Horror is part of the knot in Poe’s weird love tales. Such is the case in *Ligeia*.

Like so many of Poe’s heroines, Ligeia, a woman of dark beauty and invincible will, dies; her grief-stricken widower comforts himself, first with opium, and then with a second bride, “the fair-haired and blue-eyed” Lady Rowena. Unfortunately, he has little use for this replacement; she is afraid of him and he comes to detest her. She rapidly turns ill and dies. When the shroud falls from her face, he sees not Rowena, but Ligeia restored to life. Deep as is his love for Ligeia, deeper still is the certainty of the husband’s longing for her. Carried to an extreme form, it becomes monomania, the fixation upon a single desire. Critics who, doubting the narrator, necessarily believe that he himself murdered Rowena, have questioned this literal reading. However, it can reasonably be held that in some sense the tale contains, or at least permits, contradictory interpretations.

The theme of premature burial received a definitive statement in works like *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846) and, most memorably, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. From the beginning the narrator of the latter tale sees a relationship between the lonely, dilapidated, and melancholy House of Usher and its owner, his old friend Roderick Usher. The crack in the structure of the mansion emblematically represents the imminent collapse of Roderick's ruined personality. His condition is complicated by the death of his sister Madeline, whose corpse he will preserve for a fortnight in a vault in the building rather than bury her under feet of earth. Throughout the tale he is in an acute state of terror arising from his "morbid acuteness of the senses" and "superstitious impressions" concerning the house. For several nights after Madeline's death, the narrator and the self-tormented Roderick both suffer from nightmares, until the climax of the story is reached when Madeline, bloody and spectral, returns to life from the tomb and throws herself upon her brother. Collapsing to the floor, he dies crying hysterically, "We have put her living in the tomb!" Subsequently the house itself, which Roderick has blamed for exercising a malignant influence over the lives of himself and his family, sinks into the surrounding lake. Poe liked to repeat that his writings about human obsessions had transformed the clichés of Gothic fiction into a "horror of the soul". His technique of spiralling intensification is here at its utmost perfection.

Interpretations still appear claiming that Roderick and Madeline reflect Poe's fear of incest. Once again, in *The Black Cat* (1843), some critics have objected to his fantasizing up to the point of hallucination, believing that in this story Poe was probing his own disturbed state of mind. But one should avoid confusing the highly rational mind of Poe with those of his distraught characters.

*The Black Cat* is a classic tale of guilty conscience, where the murderer's secret is given away by the cat that he accidentally walled up when he killed his wife. In creating the narrator Poe intended here to explore the depth of "the spirit of PERVERSENESS" which, we are told, "is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart." And so, he distils horror from domesticity, subtly recognizing that every mind is either half-mad or capable of slipping easily into madness. In the ironic monologue of *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) in particular, the narrator bases his plea upon the assumption that madness is incompatible with systematic action, and, as evidence of his capacity for the latter, he relates how he has executed a hideous crime with rational precision. Beneath the placid surface of normal existence, the demon of intemperance lurks within us all.

The oscillation from insanity to rational control affects also Legrand, the misanthropic and mentally unbalanced philosopher of

*The Gold Bug* (1843). His intellectual pastime is the collection of natural specimens, and when the narrator calls on him he finds Legrand making a sketch on a scrap of paper of his latest discovery, a gold bug. Exposing the paper to the heat of the fire, Legrand's scientific mind brings out a secret writing, the interpretation of which leads him to the recovery of a hidden treasure. There is a method in his madness. The contents of the oblong wooden chest, whose total value he estimates "at a million and a half of dollars", make him rich beyond his wildest dreams. *The Gold Bug* was based on a story that actually happened. A fool in California had found gold, and America had gone mad in the search for the gold that Legrand had so readily excavated upon his successful deciphering of the pirate letter.

Poe was not much concerned with the precise nature of madness but with the conditions and stages whereby madness manifested itself in otherwise average, commonplace human beings. Throughout his tales, Poe shifts attention from the grisly deed to the mind that is driven to it, peculiarly anticipating the Freudian speculation about drives or instincts. Poe's gift of dramatization of the delicately harrowing relations between the world of common sense and that of the imagination is significantly displayed in *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1843). Placed in a dark pit, the narrator soon falls into unreasoning despair, while his own imagination torments him far more than do his captors. By close analogy, the same subjective "demons" are at work in the timeless terror of the mariner whirled around the abyss in *The Descent into the Maelström* (1841). The abnormal, in its various manifestations, the sinister, the diseased, even the disgusting were Poe's natural themes, based on that great mystery of life – subconscious mental activity. Looking into the dark glass of both the human mind and soul, Poe sees only the ghosts that will not be laid to rest.

The story of the split personality that was to produce Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is prefigured in *William Wilson* (1839), a tale admired by Dostoevsky and still central to the great fictional tradition of the double. What is curious is that in *William Wilson*'s history Poe reproduced episodes from his own life, and he also assigned to his fictitious narrator his own birthday. Wilson is tormented by a strange person who bears the same name; competes with him in class and sports; copies his dress and manner; and, as he says in a puzzled expression, "even my voice did not escape him." Maddened by this "exquisite portraiture", he forces the double into a duel, kills him, and hears – or perhaps even speaks – a final pronouncement, "You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead.... In me didst thou exist." Wilson hates his double, but in the end submits to his "arbitrary will." Despite a full awareness of his own actions, he cannot refrain from

recalling that extraordinary circumstance in his life which he himself had never understood.

True, it would not be difficult to find proof anywhere in Poe's writings of his fascination with the supernatural. In a tale where the unbelievable happens, such as *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), the basic question is essentially the same: is the narrator's word to be trusted? During a plague that is devastating the country, Prince Prospero summons a thousand lords and ladies to the extreme seclusion of one of his exotic abbeys. A masked ball is decided on so as to pass the time pleasantly. As in the world of fairy-tale, at the stroke of midnight a figure wearing the costume of the Red Death appears and horrifies the guests. The Prince is the first to fall dead; and after him, one by one the revellers expire until all lie dead.

Poe is a mental adventurer, and more than once he reminds us of his credo, "I believe because it is absurd." When the French decadent poets of the latter part of the nineteenth century discovered an American source for their sense of the power of art, it was to Poe they looked, a writer for whom nature provided no security. At that time, the French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire began to translate his work with a missionary zeal.

The more one reads Poe, the more one feels that he used only a limited range of emotions, but that he used them with extraordinary craftsmanship, supremely mastering his obsessive materials. The "literary artist", as Poe himself wrote in *The Poetic Principle* (1850), conceives "a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out." In a short tale the unity of effect can be stronger, since "brevity is in direct ratio to the intensity." Its concentration helps him to keep "during the limits of a single sitting, . . . the soul of the reader under the writer's control." Frightened to death, the reader comes away from the story with nerves laid raw. Poe really was a *haunted* man, and as a writer, he had the power to haunt his readers. The great fantasist whose grave went without a tombstone for twenty-six years is now acknowledged as one of the classic American writers.

# Mystery Tales



# The Fall of the House of Usher

Son coeur est un luth suspendu;  
Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.

DE BÉRANGER

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 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 every-day 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 gray 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 cheerfulness 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 within 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 – for 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 gray 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 over-

spread 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 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 woodwork 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 scrutinising 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 valet, 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 objects around me – while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon 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 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 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 remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. 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.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality – of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* 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 wan 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 miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossa-

mer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.

In the manner of my 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 trepidancy – an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision – that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation – that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural 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 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, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy – a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms, and the general manner of the narration had their weight. 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 odours 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.

To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. “I shall perish,” said he, “I *must* perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I

dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect – in terror. 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, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth – in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated – an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit – an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence.

He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin – to the severe and long-continued illness – indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution – of a tenderly beloved sister – his sole companion for long years – his last and only relative on earth. “Her decease,” he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, “would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) 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. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread – and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me, as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door, at length, 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 the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but, on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the prostrating power of the destroyer; and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain – that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself: and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavours to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom.

I shall ever bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphureous lustre over all. His long improvised dirges will ring forever in my ears. Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch,

into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why; – from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavour to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least – in the circumstances then surrounding me – there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.

One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend, partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction, may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, 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 and inappropriate splendour.

I have just spoken of that morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid *facility* of his *impromptus* could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement. The words

of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, as he gave it, because, in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. 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.

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 wingèd odour went away.

III

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