

UNIT ONE

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

(1839)

BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

Son cœur est un luth suspendu; sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.¹

De Béranger

¹ During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively² low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly³ dreary tract⁴ 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 rank⁵ sedges⁶—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

1 Son cœur est un luth suspendu; sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne: (French) His heart is a hanging lute; whenever one touches it, it resounds.

2 oppressively: in a heavy and oppressive way

3 singularly: very; in an unusual way

4 tract: an area of land

5 rank: showing vigorous and profuse growth

6 sedge: a plant like grass that grows on wet ground, often next to rivers

than to the after-dream of the reveller¹ 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 goading² of the imagination could torture into aught³ 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 grapple⁴ 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 annihilate⁵ its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous⁶ brink of a black and lurid⁷ tarn that lay in unruffled⁸ 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.

2 Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn⁹ of some weeks. Its proprietor¹⁰, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions¹¹ 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 importunate¹² nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation¹³. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a

1 reveller: a person who is having fun in a noisy way, usually with a group of other people and often after drinking alcohol

2 goading: urging; spurring

3 aught: (old use) anything

4 grapple: to come to terms or deal successfully with

5 annihilate: to destroy completely

6 precipitous: extremely steep

7 lurid: shocking and violent in a way that is deliberate

8 unruffled: not ruffled; smooth

9 sojourn: a temporary stay in a place away from one's home

10 proprietor: a person who has the exclusive right or title to something

11 boon companion: very close friend

12 importunate: asking for things many times in a way that is annoying

13 agitation: mental state of extreme emotional disturbance

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 alleviation¹ 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 forthwith² what I still considered a very singular³ summons.

3 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 mind⁴, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted⁵ art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent⁶ yet unobtrusive⁷ charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored 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 premises⁸ with the accredited⁹ 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 collateral¹⁰ issue, and the consequent undeviating¹¹ transmission, from sire¹² to son, of the patrimony¹³ with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint¹⁴

1 alleviation: the act of reducing something unpleasant (as pain or annoyance)

2 forthwith: immediately; at once

3 singular: unusual or strange; odd

4 time out of mind: a time in the past that is so long ago that people have no knowledge or memory of it

5 exalted: of high rank, position or great importance

6 munificent: extremely generous

7 unobtrusive: not attracting unnecessary attention

8 premise: the building and land near to it that a business owns or uses

9 accredited: officially recognized as something; with official permission to be something

10 collateral: descended from a common ancestor but through different lines

11 undeviating: going directly ahead from one point to another without veering or turning aside

12 sire: the founder of a family; forefather

13 patrimony: the property that is given to someone when their father dies

14 quaint: attractive in an unusual or old-fashioned way

and equivocal¹ 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.

4 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 vicinity²—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 pestilent³ and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish⁴, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

5 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 tangled⁵ web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation⁶. 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 specious⁷ totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault⁸, 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

1 equivocal: not having one clear or definite meaning or intention

2 vicinity: the area around a particular place

3 pestilent: annoying; irritating

4 sluggish: with little movement; very slow

5 tangled: twisted together in an untidy way

6 dilapidation: the state or process of falling into decay or being in disrepair

7 specious: seeming right or true but actually wrong or false

8 vault: a room under a church or in a cemetery, used for burying people

have discovered a barely perceptible fissure¹, 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.

6 Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway² to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet³, 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 sombre⁴ tapestries of the walls, the ebony blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial⁵ 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 accosted⁶ me with trepidation⁷ and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

7 The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty⁸. 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 recesses⁹ of the vaulted and fretted¹⁰ ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless,

1 fissure: a long deep crack in something, especially in rock or in the earth

2 causeway: a raised road or path across water or wet ground

3 valet: a man's personal servant who takes care of his clothes, serves his meals, etc.

4 sombre: gloomily dark; shadowy

5 armorial: of or relating to heraldry or heraldic arms

6 accost: to speak to someone

7 trepidation: great worry or fear about something unpleasant that may happen

8 lofty: (of buildings, mountains, etc.) very high and impressive

9 recess: the part of a place that is furthest from the light and hard to see or get to

10 fretted: decorated with patterns

antique, and tattered¹. 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.

8 Upon my entrance, Usher rose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious² warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality³—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé*⁴ 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 cadaverousness⁵ of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid⁶, 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 tenuity⁷;—these features, with an inordinate⁸ 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 pallor⁹ 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 unheeded¹⁰, and as, in its wild gossamer¹¹ 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.

1 tattered: old and torn; in bad condition

2 vivacious: vigorous and animated

3 cordiality: behavior that is friendly, but formal and polite

4 *ennuyé*: (French) bored; apathetic

5 cadaverousness: paleness; thinness

6 pallid: (of a person, their face, etc.) pale, especially because of illness

7 tenuity: thinness

8 inordinate: far more than is usual or expected

9 pallor: unnatural lack of color in the skin (as from bruising or sickness or emotional distress)

10 unheeded: not listened to or given serious attention

11 gossamer: very light, thin, or delicate

9 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 trepidancy¹—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 sullen². His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous³ indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance⁴) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated⁵ guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

10 It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace⁶ 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 morbid⁷ acuteness of the senses; the most insipid⁸ food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors 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.

11 To an anomalous⁹ species of terror I found him a bounden¹⁰ slave. “I shall perish,” said he, “I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall

1 trepidancy: (rare) trembling caused by fear or nervous agitation

2 sullen: gloomily or resentfully silent or repressed

3 tremulous: quivering as from weakness or fear

4 in abeyance: not being used, or being stopped for a period of time

5 modulated: changed or adjusted in pitch, tone, or volume

6 solace: a feeling of comfort that makes one feel less sad

7 morbid: caused by or altered by or manifesting disease or pathology

8 insipid: lacking taste or flavor

9 anomalous: different from what is normal or expected

10 bounden: something that one feels one must do; a responsibility which cannot be ignored

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 abhorrence¹ 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 phantasm², FEAR.”

12 I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained³ 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 supposititious⁴ 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 of⁵ long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets⁶, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence.

13 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 palpable⁷ 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 regarded⁸ her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings.

1 abhorrence: a feeling of strong hatred or disgust; loathing

2 phantasm: a thing seen in the imagination

3 enchain: to bind with chains

4 supposititious: based primarily on surmise rather than adequate evidence

5 by dint of: by means of

6 turret: a small narrow tower on top of a building, especially a castle

7 palpable: obvious or intense and is easily noticed

8 regard: to look at somebody or something, especially in a particular way

A sensation of stupor¹ oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating² steps. When a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance³ of the brother; but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness⁴ had overspread the emaciated⁵ fingers through which trickled⁶ many passionate tears.

14 The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled⁷ the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away⁸ of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical⁹ character were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken¹⁰ 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 prostrating¹¹ 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.

15 For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors 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.

16 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

1 stupor: a state of near unconsciousness in which a person is unable to behave normally or think clearly

2 retreating: moving back or away

3 countenance: a person's face or their expression

4 wanness: unnatural lack of color in the skin (as from bruising or sickness or emotional distress)

5 emaciated: thin and weak, usually because of illness or lack of food

6 trickle: to flow, or to make something flow, slowly in a thin stream

7 baffle: to confuse someone completely; to be too difficult or strange for someone to understand or explain

8 wasting away: the process of losing energy and vigor, especially because of illness

9 cataleptical: causing someone to become stiff and unconscious for a short time

10 betake: to go somewhere

11 prostrating: making someone feel weak, shocked, and unable to do anything

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 dirges¹ 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 brooded², and which grew, touch by touch, into vagueness 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 endeavor to educe³ more than a small portion which should lie within the compass⁴ of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed⁵ 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 hypochondriac⁶ 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.

17 One of the phantasmagoric⁷ 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 splendor.

18 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

1 dirge: a slow, sad song or piece of music, sometimes performed at funerals

2 brood: to think a lot about something that makes a person annoyed, anxious or upset

3 educe: to bring out (something, such as something latent)

4 compass: a range or an extent, especially of what can be achieved in a particular situation

5 overawe: to impress someone so much that they feel nervous or frightened

6 hypochondriac: a person who suffers from hypochondria

7 phantasmagoric: characterized by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtapositions