THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER.

BY EDGAR A. POE.

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 sleeper upon opium—the bitter lapse into common 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 gauding 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 reason, and the analysis, of this power, lie 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 rein ed 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 re-modelled 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 pitiable mental derangement which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me as his best, and indeed, his only personal friend, with a view of attaining, 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, what I still considered a very singular summons, forthwith.

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 magnificent yet unobtrusive 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 tiding 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 exerted 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 passersby who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment, of looking down within the turn, had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt, that the consciousness of the rapidity of the descent, and the increasing velocity with which the momentum of the car accelerated the increase itself. Such, I have observed, is the paradoxical law of all sensations having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the height of the introit, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me, and to work upon my imagination as really to believe that around about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their situation. A region atmospheric which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the dry cypress woods, and the gray walls, and the silent turn, in the form of being of the most hydraulic vapor or gustal cold, plain and familiar, and learned—shaken off from my spirit by the rapidity of the descent. But my fancy, by a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The disintegration of ages had been great. Minute fungz overpowered the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet this all was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the mansion had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the utterly passive, and evidently decayed condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the species totality of old wood-work which has lasted 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 tokens of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a little perceptible fissure, which, extending from the root of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the swollen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took me through the stables and into the stables, and thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the study of the master.

Much of what I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to brighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carving of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the cold blackness of the doors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which united as I strode, but were matters to which, or to which in such, which I had been accustomed from my early years—I hesitated not to acknowledge them, but I was still, and was not to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. One of the most profound the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low musing and perplexity. He accosted me with repulsion and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master. The room was vast. I found myself was very large and excessively lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the clock tower door as to be altogether inaccessible from within.

Feebly gleams of imprisoned light made their way through the trelizzed jalousies, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, overstrung in vain to reach the remotest angles of the chamber, to the recesses of the windows and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, sumptuous, and tawdry. 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 the most intense, deep, and irreconcilable glooms hung over and pervaded all.

I am not sure. Escher arose from a sofa upon which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, as I first thought of an overweening self-confidence of the constrained effect of the enigmatical man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance, and at some moment, while he spoke, I passed over him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before been so thoroughly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to form the identity of the man before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverous expression of composure—a eye large, lids, and skin luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pale, but not a centrifugal, insinuating curve; a nose of the delicate Hibernian mould; but with a lowness unusual in similar features; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a manly mental energy; hair of more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate, evergreen, and a thousand such, which I cannot now or ever forget, so far as they are capable of being forgotten. And this in the more exaggerated of the prevailing character of those features which in the expression they were wont to convey, so much of change that I should have thought them incapable of change. This was an absolutely perfect state, above all things startling and even wondrous. The silken hair, too, had been suffused to grey all unounced, and me, in its wild gaspex tenture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its arid expanse with any idea of simple humanity.

THE HOUSE OF UESHER.

The house of Escher was a spot of horror and gloom. It was shrouded in a thick mist of melancholy. The walls were of a sombre brown color, and the windows were dark and shadowy. The doors were closed, and the curtains drawn. The air was heavy and oppressive. The house was haunted by the ghosts of a former generation. The nights were dark and stormy, and the winds howled around the building. The people who lived in it were miserable and wretched. The children were destitute of all comfort and support. The house was a scene of never-ending woe, and the people who dwelt in it were forever tormented by the spirits of the departed. The house was a place of darkness and despair, and the people who lived in it were forever miserable and wretched.
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 sulfurous lustre over all. His long improvisations will ring for ever in my ears. Among other things, I bear painlessly 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 inscriptions at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why, from these paintings (vivid as there images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor 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 over-awed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least—-in the circumstances then surrounding me—there came out of the pure abstractions which the hyperesthesia 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 problematical 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 expanse, 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. 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 faculty of his imitations could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasies, (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhapsodical verbal improvisations,) the result of that intense mental collectiveness 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 caprices I have easily borne away in memory. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, because, in the under or mystical 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 just:

I.
In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace—
Snow-white palace—rose its head.

In the monarch Thought’s dominion—
It stood there!
Never asparg spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

II.
Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow;
(This—call this—I was in the olden Time long ago)
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day.
Along the ramparts plumed and pollid,
A winged odour went away.

III.
Wanders in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Siegeis moving musically
To a late’s well-tuned law,
Round about a throne, where sitting
(Perphyrogenite!)
In state his glory well befitting,
The sovereign of the realm was seen.
ter of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtuse and eager inquiries on the part of medical men, and of the remote and opposed situation of the foregone position and the facility. I will not describe that illustration, but shall attempt to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom we have just seen, and the exceeding density of the cloud, which seemed to press upon the gates of the house, so as not to prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew carrying all along with them. The sunset closed the house, immediately that we could see anything about the cubes. 

"You must never confine a man under a thousand dollars, in the worst purpose of a dungeon—keep, and, in later days, as a substitute for powder, or other highly condensed sensation, as a portion of its form, or its nature;—it may be that they have to speak through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door of massive iron, been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp gaging sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden upon tresses within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet uncrested list of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the victim. The exact similitude between the brother and sister even here again startled and confounded us. Usher, dividing, perhaps, my thoughts, measured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twice, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unavailing. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as would all maladies of a strictly established character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bottom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lips which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toll, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features. A digression between the brother and sister even here again startled and confounded us. Usher, dividing, perhaps, my thoughts, measured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twice, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unavailing. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as would all maladies of a strictly established character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bottom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lips which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toll, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features.
We suppose that many persons will be greatly mystified to learn that America was discovered as early as the tenth century, which is several centuries previous to the discovery by Columbus. His fame is held so sacred by a large portion of mankind that obstacles are thrown in the way of any attempt to prove that it was visited long before his birth.

We are no means willing to lessen the glory acquired by Columbus in his perilous voyage; for we have no reason to suppose that he availed himself of any information respecting the prior discovery. It is true that he visited Iceland in the early part of his life, and it is probable that he made himself acquainted with the western discoveries of the Northmen. But his own famous voyage was made in quest of India; and that he had no reason to suppose them to have discovered the land he was in search of, is sufficiently apparent from his never having mentioned their discoveries to the sovereigns whose patronage he sought. Had he thought this to be the case, he could have told the sovereigns who considered his scheme as visionary, that the country had already been discovered by the Northmen; and that he, having visited Iceland in his youth, had made himself perfectly acquainted with their discoveries, and had no doubt, in his own mind, of being able to reach this country. This would have been the most powerful motive he could have brought forward for making the attempt; and it is very probable, had he mentioned it to any of the sovereigns by whom his proposal was rejected, that they, having proof that there really existed a country in the west, would have immediately lent him their assistance for the advancement of his design.

But we have every reason to suppose that America might have been discovered by the Northmen even if there were no records to prove it. These people, who were natives of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and some of the other northern countries of Europe, were the great navigators of their age. Their fleets covered most of the sea by which Europe is surrounded; they had made repeated visits to Scotland, England, and some other countries, and some of their vessels had sailed through the strait of Gibraltar, visited Marseilles in the reign of the emperor Charlemagne, and spread over the whole coast of the Mediterranean. That they discovered and colonized Iceland and Greenland before the period of their alleged discovery of America, is a matter of undisputed history. Now there is no reason to suppose that the Northmen, who had sailed so far as the Mediterranean, would have hesitated to cross the strait which separated Greenland from America, being only about two hundred miles in breadth.

Having finished these preliminary observations, we will now give a brief account of the voyages made by the Northmen to America in the tenth century. We derive our information on this subject principally from the chart entitled "Antiquitates Americanae," which has recently been published by the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries at Copenhagen, a society that has devoted itself to the task of rescuing from oblivion the accounts of the early discoveries of the Northmen, which have remained in the hands of the Icelanders, who had made a respectable progress in literature at the period of the discovery, and are known to have maintained a high literary character ever since. The records thus preserved by the Icelanders have always been respected by them as authentic, and have precisely the same degree of authority as any other records of the time. They have been comparatively neglected by the historians of the south of Europe from a variety of causes, one of which is, that they are expressed in the Idæus language, which is now almost entirely lost. They first made this discovery, or, as they call it, "the discovery of America," when their ships were being driven by the wind from Iceland to Greenland, and were cast ashore on the coast of Labrador. This fact is thus recorded in their histories.

The ballad of "The Haunted Palace," introduced in this tale, was published separately some months ago, in the Baltimore "Museum."