
USHER HOUSE

Opera in One Act.
Music and Libretto by Gordon Getty after
The Fall of the House of Usher
by Edgar Allan Poe

CAST

In order of appearance:

Edgar Allan POE

RODERICK Usher, POE's host and old friend

MADELINE Usher, RODERICK's sister

Doctor PRIMUS, MADELINE's physician

ANCESTORS

ATTENDANT

MUSICIANS

Tenor

Baritone

Dancer / Soprano

Bass

Dancers

Actor: Spoken Voice

Actors: Non-speaking

Georgia, about 1834

Foreword

Poe's intergrown house and family of Usher are artworks of morbidity and malaise worthy of the spectacular climax he devised for them. He has preferred to make mood everything, saving almost all dialogue and explicit action for the closing scene. There is no moral, no tragic flaw, no explanation. Poe rather gives us the logic of the nightmare, and on this plane his logic is airtight.

Probably the safest course in dramatizing this gothic masterpiece would have been to save both letter and spirit as intact as possible. In fact, I found myself taking liberties. To start, I have made Poe himself the narrator who lives to tell the tale. More radically, I have conceived him and the doomed siblings as types of an ante-bellum warmth and gallantry which hardly exist anywhere in the prose of the real Poe, and must be counter to his purposes here. I have added other gothic staples – forbidden knowledge, a Faustian pact, ghostly ancestors – and have shifted all into a tale of good and evil and redemption. Good means Poe and the siblings, evil means Primus and the ancestors, and Madeline becomes the agent of redemption.

To fit this new design, I have played down Roderick's ailments, and played up his geniality and hospitality. I show no hint of his intolerance of light and noise, suggesting that the lumens and decibels he meets are within his comfort zone, or, if not, that he is too considerate a host to wish to seem a burden. Meanwhile, I have done everything I can to make Madeline endearing, not threatening. Only the forces of evil fear her. This premise can make the close all the more horrific.

For better or worse, the deed is done. Directors and interpreters are entreated not to research the original, or biographies of Poe, for clues to motivation or personality. There are no clues outside these pages.

The director is free to leave out the attendant, and to suggest the ancestors by visual effects alone, without actual performers. On-stage musicians may be members of the orchestra or may be left out.

Prologue

A soft light flickers equally over the sides and front of the auditorium. Scrim depicts a miasmatic swampland, moving as if seen by a traveler. The voice of Poe is heard from no place in particular.

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 evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.

Scene One

Glimmering light out. Lights up on Roderick leading Poe into the library.

RODERICK

Can it be five years, my friend? Is it possible, Eddie?

POE

Roderick, upon my word, it is.

RODERICK

Is it possible? Five years! I fear that time has not noticed us here in our solitary world. Our clocks are the seasons; they run slow. But you will enliven us. What is the news of Richmond, Boston, London? And what of our classmates? Do you still hear from Crewe? Has Stone found enough to eat? And what of good Professor Grubbins? Doctor Dodge? They will not have forgotten such a scholar as Eddie Poe! (*Motions him to sit. They sit.*)

POE

(*Laughing*) All of them well, Roderick. In the pink. Crewe married Ellen and Stone is fatter than ever. But I, a scholar? A poor counterfeit, to any that had known Roderick Usher for comparison.

RODERICK

Nonsense!

POE

Yes, they knew better. You were the real article. Mine was the dunce cap, as between us two. Yours were the laurels.

RODERICK

Not a bit! None could touch you! And it is not five years! (*Sobering*) Yet I know, well I know, my friend, that every day of them must show in my appearance. Let us speak

plainly. You see that my letter did not exaggerate. I hope you are not distressed. Yes, my old disorders have worsened. I have become painfully sensitive to sound and light. I fear our old revels and carousals would be quite beyond me, quite beyond me.

(Brightening again) But that does not mean that hospitality has left Usher House! Indeed, we have arranged a surprise tonight in your honor! I will hear no protest!

POE

A surprise? Roderick, you put me to your old puzzles.

RODERICK

(Laughing) No puzzles, Eddie! I have learned my lesson many times. Nothing can be hidden from Eddie Poe. I will reveal everything in a moment. But first, tell me, Eddie, have we provided well for you? Are your rooms comfortable? Are you rested and refreshed? I trust we have not disgraced ourselves. Guests are valued here, and scholars above all. If you are tired from your journey, then say but a word and the surprise can be put off.

POE

Tired? Not in the least! From Savannah to Poole's Landing by comfortable packet this morning, then the ride here through your picturesque marshland. A few easy hours.

RODERICK

Eddie, the truth!

POE

I swear it, Roderick! I have never felt fresher. And as for puzzles, I could never learn a fraction of your skill in them. You are still a legend at school. Do you know that you solve mysteries in my stories, under another name?

RODERICK

Eddie, what an honor!

POE

You review famous crimes in Paris from news accounts, after the Prefecture gives them up as insoluble, and solve them while scarcely stirring from your chair. None who know you will doubt that I mean Roderick Usher. But my stories are only sketches now. They will go no further without your blessing.

RODERICK

Then you have it! Stories about me by Eddie Poe! That will put some shine on the family crest! I cannot wait to read them! But Eddie, I have still said nothing about the surprise tonight.

POE

You have not, my old friend, and you must now have pity on me. I fear I am still a child at heart. Reveal the surprise!

RODERICK

Well then, we shall have a ball! Nothing less will do! A ball, this very night! All our guests have been avid to meet the famous man of letters. I have written some pieces for it myself, just as in the old days. You shall judge if they are worth hearing. If not, have no mercy!

POE

New music by Roderick Usher would have brought me here at a gallop, even if our old friendship were not reason enough.

RODERICK

Done, then! We shall have a ball!

POE

Done! But the guests, Roderick. Where have you found them? From landfall onward, I saw not a single person nor habitation. Do they somehow come from Savannah? Or (*In jest*) do you summon them up from the depths, like a sorcerer?

RODERICK

(*With only a moment of embarrassment*) Just so, my friend! Just so, in a way. They come from the depths of this house, and before that from Savannah and much farther. Each of them is an old visitor here. Usher House is indeed remote. And you are too kind as to our landscape. It is desolate. But we have rooms aplenty and a devotion to family. Many of my relatives share this roof. I hope we will not disappoint you. We are not as modish as those of the great cities. But there are lovers of learning among us.

POE

Perfect! I come here to cleanse myself of the modishness of the great cities. I welcome the lovers of learning!

RODERICK

Then you will be at home in Usher House. I do not boast. Scholars here have never been disappointed in their welcome or in our resources. We Ushers have always been devoted to the old studies, every one of us, from father to son beyond remembrance. And we are a race of collectors. We have spared no pains, no expense. We have brought together tracts, monographs, manuscripts of the greatest interest and rarity. Come, Eddie, first let us look at some of our old favorites! (*Both men rise.*) Here are manuscripts of Gresset, Swedenborg, the *Belphegor* of Machiavelli, the *Directory of the Inquisition* by Eymeric de Gironne, and look here, Eddie! Here is the *Vigiliae Mortuorum*. Yes, it exists after all. All these but whet the appetite. Pride of place belongs to our medical archives. The ancients knew secrets that would astound the schools today. We have threshed out many of them, and will more. The whole house is designed for learning. Soon we will show you our observatory, where anyone who likes can study the stars in the old manner. Have I told you of the history of Usher House?

POE

Roderick, you have not, but let me guess a little.

RODERICK

By all means!

POE

Apart from the modern conveniences, I should have said it was Anglo-Saxon, even partly Celtic. And mightn't it be more at home in the moors of Devon or Cornwall than here in sultry Georgia?

RODERICK

Bravo, exact! I knew you would not disappoint me. It was built long before the Conquest. None of us is certain when. It stood on the ancestral land of the Ushers, near Exeter. Gildas writes of it.

POE

Gildas!

RODERICK

Yes, parts of it are very old indeed. He speaks of a shrine at Usher-on-Exe. It would have been pagan, but we cannot be sure to what god. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are silent, but there is a most lurid entry in *Exon Domesday Book*. I warn you, they are not flattering. (*Amused*) This is Bede: "a heterodox monastery at Usher, avoided by the countryfolk." And Dunstan: "A great keep, minster and library by Usher Tarn, but of poor reputation." Unflattering, to be sure! But let us not make too much of the pious caveats of Dunstan or Bede. Dogma, dogma was the thing, and men saw devils in the slightest inconformance.

POE

And what of *Exon Domesday*?

RODERICK

I have saved that for last. It tells of the most bizarre and ignominious episode in our long history. (*Shows Poe the passage.*) I will let you read it without further preface by me.

(*Poe reads silently. Roderick sits.*)

POE

Good God! (*Remains standing in astonishment.*)

RODERICK

(*Quotes from memory.*) "Atque idem"... no, it is better in English: "and King Edward the Confessor commanded that the building called Usher House be sundered stone from stone, and the stones cast in Usher Tarn." Into the tarn, no less! We can but guess at the cause of the Confessor's wrath. Yet as late as my father's time, the Yeomanry there still

claimed that lightning from the skies clove the house in two. (*In jest*) It is a district famous for its legends. But the stones were indeed at the bottom of Usher Tarn, true to the word, when my father bought back the land and drained it. He hauled them here and rebuilt Usher House, with modern comforts, over a tarn as like the first as he could find, even as to the faint phosphorescence that you will have noticed on your approach. He even brought back the crypt, which the Confessor had spared. And apart from the usual problems of settling – you will also have seen the faint crack running down the keep – tradition has been restored as far as the skill of the artisans would permit. We are a stubborn race, and one not content with the verdict of the Confessor. Ushers homeless for centuries gathered here with their hoarded volumes. No, we are not content that the learning of Usher House should be cast into the tarn.

POE

Nor am I content. (*Sits.*) We resolved once, you and I, never to flinch from knowledge. I have kept that oath.

RODERICK

And I. It is an Usher trait. And we revere this house. We travel wherever the old learning can be found, but we come home to die. Even during our Diaspora, when nothing but the crypt remained, Ushers gathered here to commemorate, and were buried here. To Ushers, we and this place and the knowledge are one. Eddie, Eddie, this house was built by Ushers in the morning of the world, woven of stone and time when learning too could build until it fell, before saints and psalms and Caesars drove it under. We have found almost all, shred and shard, the ancient light, the wisdom unafraid, and will piece it together. Enough is already here, not all, but enough. Who masters it can master the world, Eddie. He can rope the wind! He can yoke the seas and the stars! We Ushers have hunted knowledge wherever it hides, from pole to pole, wherever the saints and Caesars drove it, and we may have enough. A little more study, a little more reflection, Eddie, and we will yoke the seas and the stars!

POE

Roderick, let me join the hunt!

RODERICK

Willingly! We will hunt the fox to earth! But there are dangers in the hunt. We know them. We accept them. Bede and Dunstan spoke the truth. The heterodox are avoided. Yes, it is laughable, but it is true, even now. We do not ignore the risks. We accept them. There is risk in learning even now.

(There is a knock at the door. Roderick has time for a look of anxiety and gesture of caution to Poe before Madeline and Primus enter. Roderick and Poe rise.)

RODERICK

Dear Madeline! Eddie, you will remember my sister Madeline when she visited me at school. We were only children then, the three of us, and now look how beautiful she has become!

(Madeline gazes vacantly ahead in the serenity of madness.)

POE

Miss Madeline, I am more than honored to renew our acquaintance. I look forward to the pleasure of your company during my visit here.

(Both men have the breeding to pretend to notice nothing strange.)

RODERICK

And may I introduce you to Doctor Primus? Doctor Primus, my old friend Edgar Poe of Richmond.

POE

It is my pleasure, sir.

PRIMUS

And mine, Mister Poe. Your fame in the old studies has reached us all. But now I fear Miss Madeline must take her medicine and prepare for bed. She is getting so much better, and we must not interrupt her recovery.

RODERICK

(Nods.) And Doctor Primus, would you care to join us for a moment, as soon as your duties permit?

PRIMUS

Certainly.

(Primus leads Madeline toward the door. Halfway there, she turns. She runs to Roderick and embraces him. She then gives her hand to Poe. She turns again, then walks back to Primus, who resumes leading her out. Exeunt Madeline and Primus. Poe starts to say something, but Roderick again catches him with a gesture. Primus re-enters.)

RODERICK

(To Poe) Now you have seen her. This is the sorrow of which my letter spoke.

POE

My friend, I did not know. I grieve with you. Yet she is perfect. I grieve with you and envy you. And yes, Roderick, I remember her visit at school. You may recall some lines I wrote then, and how beautifully she sang your setting of them.

RODERICK

I do.

POE

“Where is my lady, O where has she gone?
Over the moonrise and over the dawn.
Follow her easterly, follow the trace
Of her toe on the wind; she has run to the place
Where the morning begins, and the sea, and the sky.
Beauty and grace she is; beauty and grace
Hang in the air like chimes where she goes by.

What if I follow as best I can try,
And ring the wide world, and yet fail in the chase?
Follow her southerly; follow the mark
Of her foot in the light, of her foot in the dark,
Easterly, southerly, follow the train
Where she runs in the starlight, she runs in the rain,
In footfall and starfall, again and again.
Beauty and grace she is; beauty and grace
Hang in the air like chimes where she goes by.”

She was my model in writing that. It is as true of her now as then. Over and over I hear those lines, and I think I shall hear them for some time to come. Roderick, she is so delicate, so pure!

RODERICK

“Beauty and grace”! Yes, that is Madeline. You saw the truth, as always. Yet she is not so frail as one would suppose. In her catalepsy she might even be capable of great strength. Is it not so, Doctor Primus?

PRIMUS

It is so. Prolonged excitement could give her more strength than one would have thought possible.

RODERICK

We are fortunate to have Doctor Primus with us, and to muster the scholarly resources of this house. I spoke of our medical archives. Now you see why they are vital to me. A cure will be found. Madeline’s case is not hopeless. We will restore her health. We will cure my sister. Will we not, Doctor Primus?

PRIMUS

Every treatment is being applied...consistent with her tolerance for it.

(Roderick throws him an uneasy glance, but Primus stares ahead.)

RODERICK

My sister will recover. I am certain of it. Now, Doctor Primus, we must not keep you from your patient. My friend and I have many old recollections to share.

PRIMUS

Of course. (*Exit Primus.*)

RODERICK

Her mind is serene and pure. Many of us could envy her that. I would not deprive her of it, not for everything else in the world.

POE

She is an angel. Had I the power, I would not dare to change her.

RODERICK

Wisely spoken. Yet I would give her an ordinary life if I could. A cure can be found. It must be found! The learning of this house is equal to the task. If we bring it all to bear, encompass it all... (*Roderick breaks into sobs.*) My sister, my sister! We are twins, you know. We were children of one soul. I knew her thoughts, and she mine. When she cried in the dark, I would comfort her ... I would comfort her ... (*More sobs. Then he becomes anxious, agitated, intense. He draws closer to Poe as if to baffle an eavesdropper.*) Edgar, can you take her from here? For pity sake, take her away. Conditions here are not best for her. Leave at daybreak, the two of you. Take the noon packet to Boston. Secure the best doctors, place her in the best clinics. I will provide everything. I have not the strength, and my eyes could not tolerate the sunlight. Do it at daybreak, for mercy's sake. Swear that you will!

POE

(*Amazed at this volte-face, but moved*) I will, my friend. I swear that I will do it.

(*Roderick grips his hand. Another knock at the door.*)

ATTENDANT

(*From the door*) The guests have arrived.

(*Lights out.*)

Scene Two

The Great Hall, decked out as a ballroom. Roderick and Poe stand together, and Primus nearby. Musicians play. Some Ancestors are dancing. Others enter and are announced by the Attendant. They then bow or curtsy to Roderick as master of the house, and then courteously to Poe as guest of honor.

ATTENDANT

Lady Heliane Usher and Lord Pengarth Usher of Exeter ... Mrs. Oliver Usher of Swansea and Mister Hamish Usher of Philadelphia ...

RODERICK

I hope you will find some interest in the costumes. They recapitulate the family history. Ushers are here from many places, many times.

ATTENDANT

Lord Mordoc, Thane of Usher and Lady Berenice ...

(After these last two greet Roderick and Poe, as before, Primus escorts them silently to Lord Pengarth and Lady Heliane at a distant part of the stage. As soon as Primus is out of earshot, Roderick takes Poe's arm and speaks quickly, quietly.)

RODERICK

At daybreak?

POE

At daybreak. I will not sleep.

ATTENDANT

Miss Hannah Usher and her brother, The Honorable Eldred Usher, both of Drogheda ...

(By the time these two have finished greeting Roderick and Poe, Primus has returned.)

RODERICK

(To Poe, but for Primus' benefit) So you see, my old friend, we are not so provincial after all.

ATTENDANT

Dr. and Mrs. Duncan Usher, of Agra ...

(Enter Madeline. The Ancestors shrink against the walls in terror, as vampires from a crucifix. She curtsies to Roderick, then gives Poe a flower. Madeline dances with Roderick. The Ancestors clap soundlessly. Then Madeline dances with Poe. The Ancestors join Poe and Madeline in the dance. Madeline pauses, confused. Poe and the Ancestors also pause. Madeline begins again, and all resume. Only Madeline hears the 6/8 music, and she alone dances to it. Musicians continue visibly playing, and Ancestors

Usher House

dancing, to the tempo of “Ewig Du.” Poe stops, perplexed. Now all notice Madeline. Musicians stop playing. Ancestors retreat to watch. Madeline seems dazed. The Ancestors take a step towards Madeline. Another step. Another. Madeline falls. Primus indicates that she is dead. Roderick collapses in grief. Poe comforts him. Lights out.)

Scene Three

We are at Madeline's burial in the crypt below the keep. Vaults with inscriptions appear on the walls. Roderick, Poe, Primus and the Ancestors are present. The coffin is ready to be deposited.

RODERICK

And now it is time to bid our silent farewells to my sister Madeline. She brought us the springtime, and we shall have its memory forever.

(The coffin is deposited and the vault sealed. Roderick reels, then catches himself. Some of the Ancestors help him out of the crypt. Poe, Primus and the Ancestors remain.)

PRIMUS

(To all present, but particularly to Poe) I fear the master of the house may not long outlive the mistress. If the line of the Ushers were no more, its libraries and scholars might be scattered, its traditions unhoused. What might be done to keep it all intact? There must be new leadership once the line is ended. An exemplary scholar, young, vital, a friend to the Ushers, might advise us. For perpetuity's sake, a new line might need to be founded. If our guest cares to consider these matters and share his thoughts with us, he may wish to visit us in the observatory tomorrow evening. Now we may leave him, if he prefers, to pay his respects in private.

POE

I will reflect. To the devoted student, Usher House is a paradigm, a pinnacle. It must not be lost. But there are solemn questions to be asked. I will remain here for a moment.

(Exeunt Primus and the Ancestors.)

POE

(Speaking toward Madeline's vault)

“Beauty and grace she is, beauty and grace
Hang in the air like chimes where she goes by.”

Thank you, Miss Madeline, for a moment of solace in a troubled world.

(He places the flower she had given him before the vault. He turns to leave, but his eye catches something in the inscriptions on the other vaults. He wipes away some dust and brings his candelabra closer.)

POE

(Reading aloud from the inscriptions) “Lord Mordoc and Lady Berenice Usher ... Eldred Usher ... Hannah ... Hamish ... Lord Pengarth and Lady Heliane ... *(He rubs away more dust.)* ... Lord Primus Usher, mortuit anno 474.” *(He steps back in wonderment. Lights fade out slowly.)*

Scene Four

We are in the observatory, open to a night full of stars. The Ancestors are present. Primus is greeting Poe at the entrance, and brings him in as they speak.

PRIMUS

We are particularly honored to receive our guest here in the observatory. Ushers have studied the stars for centuries. The heavens are books for the literate to read. Much, much can be foreseen. For example, we know that unusual weather phenomena will center on this place three nights hence.

POE

Weather? Of what kind?

PRIMUS

There will be great winds, and more than winds. But let us come to that in due course. First we must make certain we are not pressing unwelcome topics. Investigation is not without cost. There is knowledge that many find distressing. Is our guest quite certain he wishes to hear more?

POE

I am a student. All knowledge is welcome to me.

PRIMUS

Then let us go a little further. First, you are modest. Your work is esteemed here. Few have looked so deeply into the shadows. Few have stepped so far along the passages that lead into this life, and from it. We know from your work that you can be trusted to see and trusted to comprehend. That is why we expect you to have found matters of antiquarian interest yesterday, when left in private after the insepulture of the Lady Madeline.

POE

I did so.

PRIMUS

All of us bear ancient names. Their recurrence is a tradition here. On the other hand, more than names can be passed from the dead to the living. More than names endure. You have heard something of our medical archives. The knowledge in them extends to a deeper understanding of life and death. Life and death, their delicate interchange, their gradations, can be whatever medical science makes of them. The magisters of Egypt and Anatolia and Brittany had learned these things over the millennia. Roman law opposed the knowledge, and so then did Church law. All was destroyed, or hidden. Some was granted to us, and to us alone, under a covenant with the Elders of Avebury. More was obtained from the Hierarchy of Syracuse and from other royal and private collections. This was passed on to Ushers with the will and aptitude to learn it. The lady Madeline has been recusant. She refused the knowledge and accepted the common path. The

master of the house wavers. If Usher tradition could be grafted onto new roots, then the new line would inherit all the knowledge. This, of course, would include the proprietary medical skills of which we have been speaking. Would our guest care to hear more?

POE

I am afraid. But I have sworn to follow knowledge to the limits of my reach. I will hear more.

PRIMUS

Then we can meet again three nights from this. Conditions will be fitter then. You will have noticed the haze or miasma that rises from the tarn and enfolds this house, though the dull might have missed it. It has to do with the medical matters of which we spoke. We call it the illumination. It had been present at the old site, in England, but the powers of the Confessor had dispersed it. Now we have found it again. In three days' time it will flame to a grandeur not seen in many lifetimes. Through its force, the interdict of the Confessor will be expunged, the desecration avenged, the wisdom promulgated, the covenant glorified. Does our guest wish to share in these historic events?

POE

I am afraid. But I have sworn never to turn aside from knowledge. I will reflect.

(Lights out.)

Scene Five

Three nights have passed. We are in Roderick's apartments. Outside, the storm that had been forecast is stirring. Roderick sits deep in thought. Poe paces nervously.

POE

Roderick, I must speak. I have heard things that I must not keep from you. Doctor Primus has spoken to me in the presence of the others. I believe they would make me heir to the secrets of this house. For the first time, I am afraid of this knowledge. My friend, forgive me for listening without your permission, and for delaying this report.

RODERICK

I knew or guessed it from the start, and you are forgiven. You have spoken honestly. But beware of Primus. Did he speak of the importance of this night?

POE

He said that the winds would rise. The phosphorescence from the tarn, or illumination as he called it, would glow bright. It had to do with the secrets of life and death. The Confessor's interdict would be expunged, and the covenant glorified.

RODERICK

(Musing) So he said even that. It is All-Hallows' Eve. And it was All-Hallows' Eve eight centuries ago when the Confessor defied the powers of that night and brought down this house. It was Primus Usher who made the covenant with the Elders, fourteen centuries ago, and founded our line by Usher Tarn. That line is nearly extinct. I say it frankly. And Primus Usher must settle his account. Primus knows that, and fears.

POE

Roderick, in the name of sanity, can that Primus Usher and this one be the same?

RODERICK

He will have told you the answer to that, in riddles. And he will have spoken of dangers in pressing further. Let us respect the dangers, and leave the riddles as they are. No doubt he will renew the debt if he can, substituting your line for mine. But Primus is deep and wise. He must have another plan, one that would keep the original pact in force.

POE

My true friend, there will be no substitution of lines. I repent my folly in hearing such a proposal. The debt will not be renewed.

RODERICK

I trust and believe you. Those same follies were once my own. I will pay for them. Still, Primus must have a plan. He is desperate or confident. Else he would not have dared to tell you so much, little as it is. He has placed himself in jeopardy. He has a plan. We ourselves may be at risk if we cannot puzzle it out. *(Short pause)* But there is something

else that weighs on me. It is an anxiety, a dread, whose occasion I cannot fix in my mind. Something frightful, something hideous and insupportable remains at the border of my gaze wherever I turn. It has obsessed me for hours, even days. I cannot find it, I cannot escape it. Surely you have seen this, and have been too kind to speak.

POE

I have seen it, but thought the fault was mine. I never should have countenanced these intrigues. You guessed them. That was the seed of your foreboding, or its nourishment. Perhaps it would be best if I withdrew to my room, and wronged my friend no further.

RODERICK

No, Edgar, stay. For God's sake, stay. You are guiltless. The cause, whatever it is, is not in you. For our old friendship, stay and help me now. Somewhere I have overlooked a warning, or left an obligation in suspense. Now the winds are rising. Primus will set his plan in motion soon. We must find it out. I must think. Yet my other apprehension distracts me.

POE

Then let me help if I can.

RODERICK

Could you read something aloud to me? You recall that at school, when I had undertaken a problem in philosophy or the calculus whose answer did not come readily, I sometimes preferred to weigh it in the midst of conversation, or even on the sporting field, rather than in the quiet of my rooms. Often you were present, and were the first hearer of my proposed solution, once I had struck on it, before any save possibly yourself could have guessed that a problem had occupied me. It is no now. Silence torments me. Read, read aloud. Something trivial, diverting. Let us banish silence and sober thought for the moment, in hope of looking at things anew.

(Poe rapidly scans the shelves and pulls down a volume.)

POE

This may do. It is the *Mad Tryst* of Sir Launcelot Channing.

RODERICK

(Claps hands and laughs merrily.) Excellent! Give us, if you will, the part where our knight breaks into the hermit's house.

POE

Let me have a moment. *(Finds the page. Hamming it up to spoof the purple prose.)*

“And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, but fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted

hand, and so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder that the noise alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest.

(A faint sound of this description has been heard as Poe concludes. Poe is startled. Roderick remains deep in thought.)

“But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore amazed to perceive a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor. And Ethelred uplifted his mace and struck the dragon, which fell before him with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it.

(Some such sound has been heard as before. Again Poe reacts while Roderick stares straight ahead.)

“And now the champion, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where it hung upon the wall, which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound.”

(Once again such a sound has been heard, still faintly. Poe reacts more strongly and is about to comment, but Roderick raises his hand.)

RODERICK

Yes, I have heard it. I heard its faint beginnings four nights ago, through wood and stone. Go from this house, my friend. You know how painfully keen my hearing has become. I can hear the fluttering of the moth's wings, the fall of leaves in the woods. Go, my friend. I and this house will close our business very soon. Go now, and no harm will come to you.

POE

I will not leave you in danger.

RODERICK

I say, I heard it that first night. It was she. I heard her stirring in her prison.

(Offstage, pure and childlike, Madeline's voice is heard as Roderick and Poe continue.)

She cried out to me in the dark, and I did not comfort her. I did not understand. She was never of their circle, never. But what vows might she not have taken in her despair? And might I not, if she had done? There has never been a plan more ingenious, more heinous or more pitiless. I tell you, he has dared to open the roof portals, even on this night. He has brought the illumination into this house. Look! *(Roderick rises and opens the window curtain. The storm and “illumination” are at maximum. Roderick closes the curtain.)* I say, he would have invited the Elders themselves, had he now the power. He

would have delivered the three of us, healthy as colts, scion and all, the line and the bargain intact. Now go, Edgar. Go at once!

POE

My friend, Primus shall face both of us or neither.

RODERICK

(With a short laugh) Primus! Primus and his plan are in ruins. He confronted her in the armory below, as you were reading. She threw him aside like an empty sack. She is still pure.

(Madeline's voice is heard, growing louder as she approaches.)

He was powerless before her. She made no vows in the dark. The writ of the Confessor runs still. It has sustained her in her madness. She comes to complete his work. Run, my friend! The rest of us have only a few more moments. My penance will be short and blithe compared to theirs. You are free. In God's name, go! As you recited, we both heard first the rending of her coffin and vault. I have said she has the strength of many men. Then we heard the cry of Primus as she discarded him. Last we heard her break down the doors of the great hall, which the others had barricaded against her. They have fled to the keep, but she has no interest in them. As we speak, she ascends the steps leading to this chamber. Escape by the side passage, my friend. Listen! The stones! Hear them! They are falling into the tarn! Sister, I am here! I will comfort you! Madman, madman, I tell you, she now stands without the door!

(The doors are blown open by the storm. Lights out, except for the "illumination" streaming in from the doorway. Madeline stands there in her cerements, then runs to Roderick. They embrace and fall dead. The house is heard more than seen to collapse. It does so in the darkness except for the quick flashes of light and the "illumination" centering on Roderick and Madeline. Poe has fled unseen. As the commotion dies down, we hear the unlocalized voice of Poe as before.)

POE

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder, and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closing sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher.

(Curtain.)

END OF OPERA