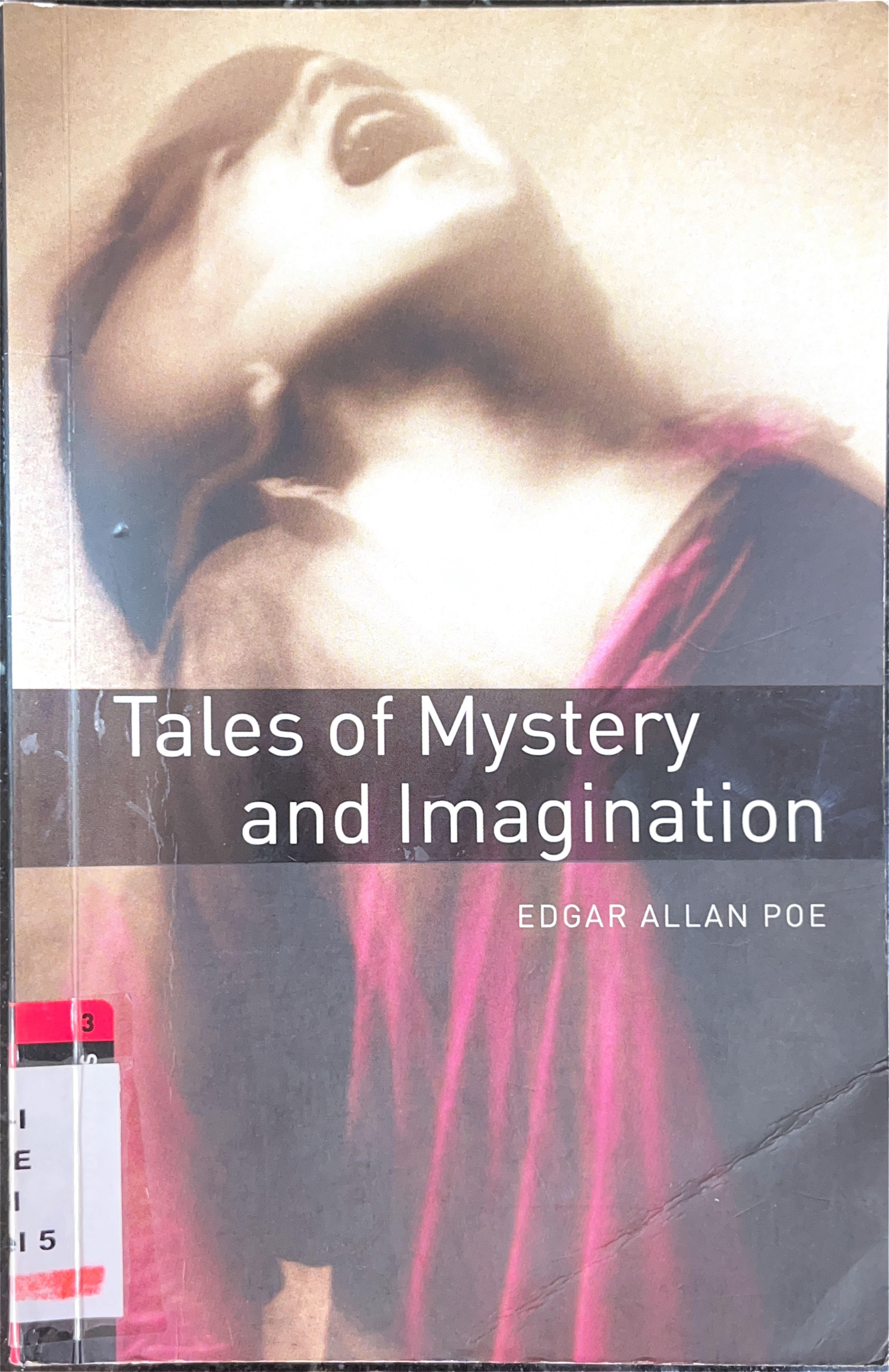




Tales of Mystery and Imagination

EDGAR ALLAN POE

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The Fall of the House of Usher

It was a grey autumn day and the sky was full of large black clouds. All day I had ridden through flat and uninteresting countryside, but at last, as it began to grow dark, I saw the end of my journey.

There, in front of me, stood the House of Usher. And at once – I do not know why – a strange feeling of deep gloom came down on me and covered me like a blanket. I looked up at the old house with its high stone walls and narrow windows. I looked around at the thin dry grass and the old dying trees, and an icy hand seemed to take hold of my heart. I felt cold and sick, and could not think of one happy thought to chase away my gloom.

Why, I wondered, did the House of Usher make me feel so sad? I could find no answer.

There was a lake next to the house and I rode my horse up to the edge and stopped. Perhaps from here the house would not seem so sad, so full of gloom. I looked down into the mirror of dark, still water, and saw again the empty, eye-like windows of the house and the dying trees all around it. The feeling of gloom was stronger than ever.

It was in this house that I was going to spend the next few weeks. Its owner, Roderick Usher, had been a good friend of mine when I was a boy. I had not seen him for many years, but recently he had sent me a letter – a sad and terrible letter. He wrote that he was ill, ill in body and ill in mind; that he wanted and needed to see me. I was his only friend, the only



I looked down into the mirror of dark, still water.

person who could help him in his illness.

Although we had been good friends when we were young, I knew very little about him. He had never spoken much about himself, but I knew that he came from a very old family of which he was the last living man. I also knew that in the Usher family there had never been many children and so

for hundreds of years the family name, together with the family home, had passed straight from father to son.

As I stood by the lake, my feeling of gloom grew and grew. I knew also that underneath my gloom lay fear, and fear does strange things to the mind. I began to imagine that the gloom was not in my mind, but was something real. It was like a mysterious cloud, which seemed to come straight from the dark lake and the dying trees and the old walls of the house. A heavy grey cloud, which carried with it disease and fear.

This was a dream, I told myself, and I looked more carefully at the building in front of me. It was, indeed, very old and I noticed that every stone had cracks and holes in it. But there was nothing really wrong with the building. No stones were missing. The only thing that I noticed was a very small crack which started at the top of the building and continued all the way down into the dark waters of the lake.

I went up to the front of the house. A servant took my horse and I stepped into the large hall. Another servant led me silently upstairs. On the walls there were many strange, dark pictures which made me feel nervous. I remembered these pictures from my earlier visits to the house when I was a child. But the feelings that the pictures gave me on this visit were new to me.

On the stairs we met the family doctor. He had a strange look on his face, a look that I did not like. I hurried on, and finally the servant opened a door and took me into the study.

The room was large and long, with high narrow windows, which let in only a little light. Shadows lay in all the corners of the room and around the dark pieces of

furniture. There were many books and a few guitars, but there was no life, no happiness in the room. Deep gloom filled the air.

When Usher saw me, he got up and welcomed me warmly. I thought he was just being polite, but as I looked into his face, I could see that he was pleased to see me. We sat down, but he did not speak at first, and for a few moments I watched him in surprise and fear. He had changed so much since our last meeting! He had the same pale thin face, the same eyes, large and clear, and the same thin lips and soft hair. But now his skin was too white, his eyes too large and bright, and he seemed a different man. He frightened me. And his long wild hair looked like a ghostly cloud around his head.

I noticed that my friend was very nervous and that his feelings changed very quickly. Sometimes he talked a lot, then he suddenly became silent and did not say a word for many hours. At other times he found it difficult to think, and his voice was heavy and slow, like the voice of a man who had drunk too much.

He told me why he had wanted to see me, and how he hoped to feel better now that I was with him. He had, he explained, a strange illness which had been in his family for a long time. It was a nervous illness which made him feel everything much more strongly than other people. He could only eat food that was almost tasteless. He had to choose his clothes very carefully because most of them hurt his skin. He could not have flowers in his room because their smell was too strong for him. Light hurt his eyes, and most sounds hurt his ears – except the soft sound of guitars. Worst of all, he was a prisoner of his own fear. 'I shall

die,' he used to say, 'because of this fear. I'm not afraid of danger. What frightens me is fear itself. At the moment I am fighting against fear, but sooner or later I won't be able to fight any more.'

During long conversations with Usher I learnt more about his strange illness. He was sure that it came from the House of Usher itself. He had not left the house for many years and he had become, he thought, as sad as the house itself. The gloom of its grey walls and its dark silent lake had become his own.

He also believed that much of his sadness was because his dear sister was seriously ill. He had one sister, Madeleine, the only other person in his family who was still living, but each day she seemed a little nearer to death.

'Her death,' Usher said blackly, 'will leave me alone in the world, the last of all the Ushers.'

While he was speaking, Madeleine passed slowly through the back of the long room and, without noticing me, disappeared. As I looked at her, my eyes felt heavy with sleep, and I had a strange feeling of fear. I looked across at Usher. He had covered his face with his hands, but I could see that he had become even paler, and that he was crying silently.

Lady Madeleine's illness was a mysterious one which no doctor could understand. Every day she became weaker and thinner, and sometimes went into a sleep which was more like death than sleep. For years she had fought bravely against her illness, but on the night of my arrival she went to bed and did not get up from it again. 'You will probably not see her again alive,' Usher said to me, shaking his head sadly. During the next few days Usher and I never spoke about

his sister. We spent a lot of time painting and reading together, and sometimes he played on his guitar. I tried very hard to help my friend, but I realized that his sadness was too deep. It was a black gloom that covered everything that belonged to his world; sometimes, indeed, he seemed close to the edge of madness.

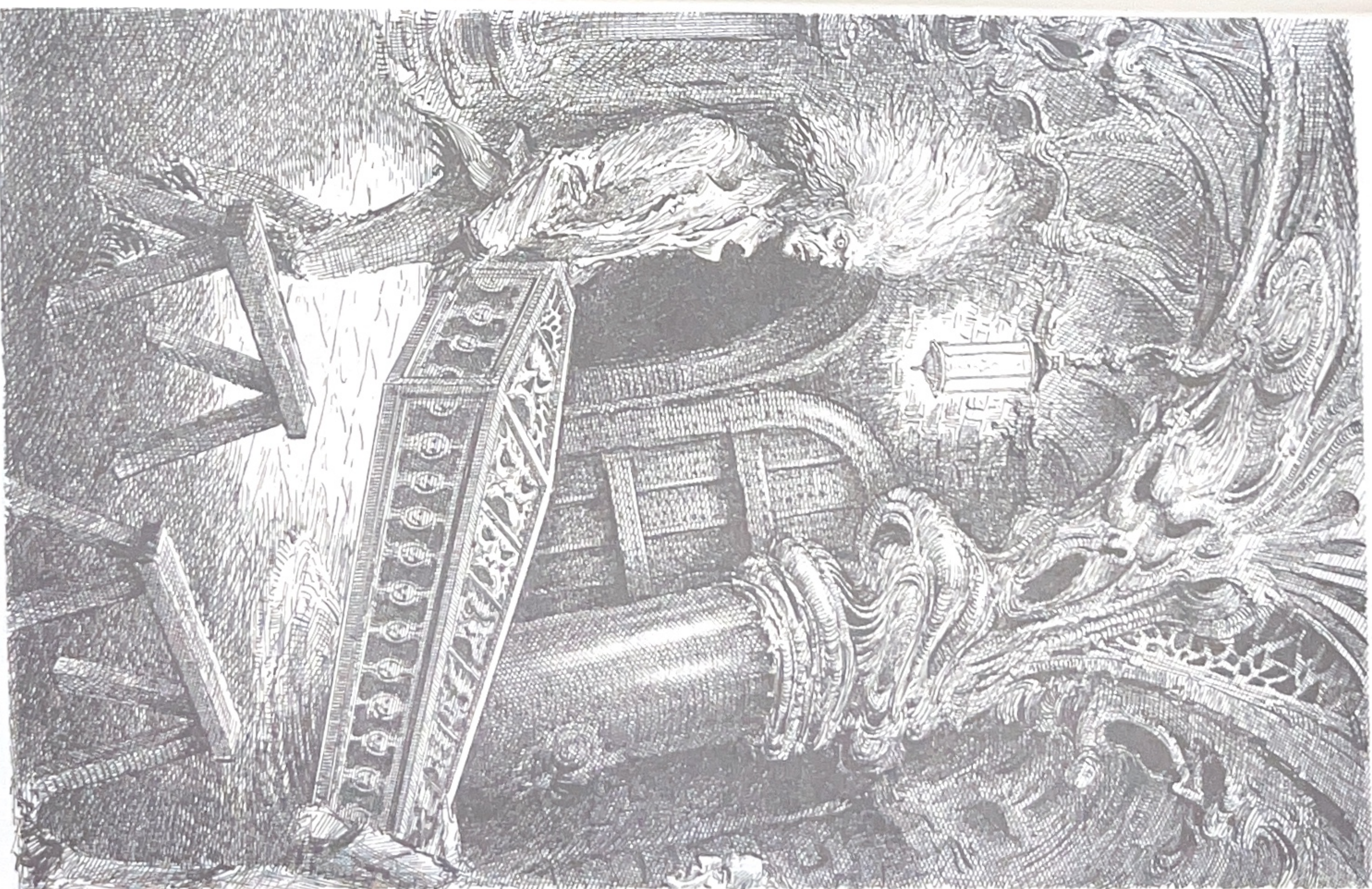
He painted strange pictures, and sang mysterious songs with wild words. His ideas, too, were strange, and he had one idea that seemed more important to him than all the others. He was quite sure that all things, plants, trees, even stones, were able to *feel*.

'The House of Usher itself,' he told me, 'is like a living thing. When the walls were first built, life went into the stones themselves and year after year it has grown stronger. Even the air around the walls and above the lake has its own life, and belongs to the house. Don't you see,' he cried, 'how the stones and the air have shaped the lives of the Usher family?'

These ideas were too fantastic for me, and I could not answer him.

One evening I was reading quietly when my friend told me, in very few words, that the Lady Madeleine had died. He had decided, he said, to keep her body for a fortnight in one of the vaults under the house, before it went to its last resting-place. This was because his sister's illness had been a mysterious one, and her doctors wanted to learn more about it. He asked me to help him and I agreed.

Together we carried the body in its coffin down to the vaults under the house. The vault that he had chosen was a long way down, but was under the part of the house where



Together we carried the body in its coffin down to the vaults.

I slept. It had once been a prison, and was small, dark, and airless, with a heavy metal door.

We put the coffin down and then gently lifted up the cover to look at the dead woman for the last time. As I looked down at her face, I realized how much Usher's sister looked like him. My friend then said a few quiet words and I learnt that he and his sister had been born on the same day. Each had known the other's mind without the need for words.

We could not look at her for long. Her strange illness had left her with a soft pink colour on her face, and that unchanging half-smile on her lips which is so terrible in death. We put back the cover of the coffin, fixed it down well, and after locking the heavy door of the vault, went back upstairs into the gloomy house.

After some days of deep unhappiness, I saw that my friend's illness of the mind was growing worse. He did not paint or read any more. He moved slowly from room to room, never knowing what to do. His face became paler, the light disappeared from his eyes, and his voice often shook with fear when he spoke. Sometimes I thought he was trying to tell me some terrible secret. At other times I thought he was going mad. He used to sit for hours, looking at nothing, listening to nothing – except the sounds in his own mind. I myself began to know real fear. I felt my friend's terror, his deep gloom, slowly taking hold of my own mind.

About seven or eight days after we had put Lady Madeleine's coffin in the vault, I went to bed but could not sleep. Hour after hour I lay there, fighting the fear and gloom that filled my mind. Outside, there was a storm which was growing wilder, and my room was full of shadows and the

dark shapes of the gloomy furniture. I tried to calm myself, but I only became more frightened.

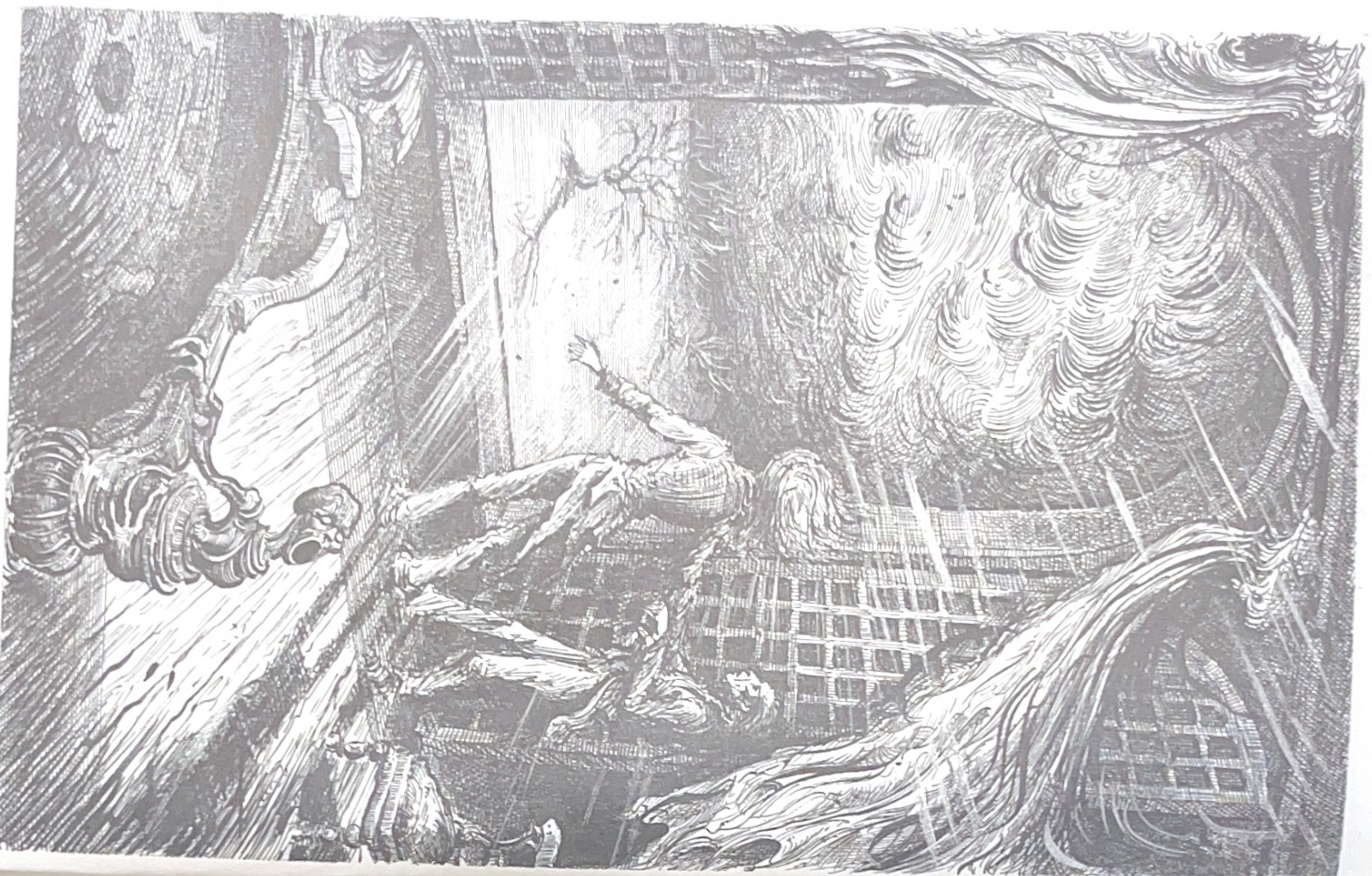
Suddenly, my body shook with a new terror. I sat up in bed and listened hard. Yes, I could hear some low sounds, coming not from the storm outside, but from somewhere inside the house. Quickly, I put on my clothes and started walking up and down the room, trying to shake off my terrible fear.

Then I heard a knock on my door and Usher came in. His face was as white as it had always been, and there was a kind of madness in his eyes. The look on his face frightened me terribly, but at the same time I was pleased not to be alone any more.

For some moments he looked around without saying a word. Then, suddenly, 'Have you not seen it? No? Then wait. You must see it.' He hurried to the window and opened it.

The wind from the violent storm outside crashed into the room, nearly knocking us to the floor. It was, indeed, a wild, but strangely beautiful night. The wind seemed to be going in circles around the house, and huge, heavy black clouds chased each other, first this way, then that way. We could see no moon and no stars, but a pale ghostly light lay around the house.

'You mustn't, no, you must not watch this,' I cried to Usher. I pushed him gently away from the window and to a seat. 'It's only a storm, and the cold night air will be dangerous to your health. Let's close the window and read together. Look, here's one of your favourite books. I will read to you, and you can listen, and so we will pass this terrible night together.'



It was a wild, but strangely beautiful night.

The book which I had picked up was *The Sad, Mad Life* of Sir Launcelot Canning. It was not really one of Usher's favourite books, but it was the only one that I had near me, so I started to read it. It was a wild, fantastic story, but I hoped that my reading would make Usher calmer and less afraid. He listened to me, indeed, but with a kind of mad seriousness that I found frightening.

I read for a while and reached the place in the book where Ethelred broke down the door of the old man's house.

Now Ethelred decided he could wait outside in the storm no longer. He lifted his heavy stick and beat against the wooden door until he had made a hole. Then with his hands he pulled the door to pieces. The noise of the dry wood cracking and breaking could be heard all through the forest.

As I finished reading this sentence, I jumped in my seat and then sat very still. I thought that I had heard, from somewhere far away in the house, the same noise of cracking and breaking wood. But I could not hear it clearly, and the noise of the storm was much louder. I continued reading:

Ethelred entered the house but could not see the old man. Then the house disappeared and he saw a dragon, with fire coming out of its mouth. Ethelred lifted his heavy stick and brought it crashing down on the dragon's head. As the dragon fell dying to the ground, it gave a terrible cry – a long, hard, unnatural scream.

Here again I stopped suddenly. I was sure that I could

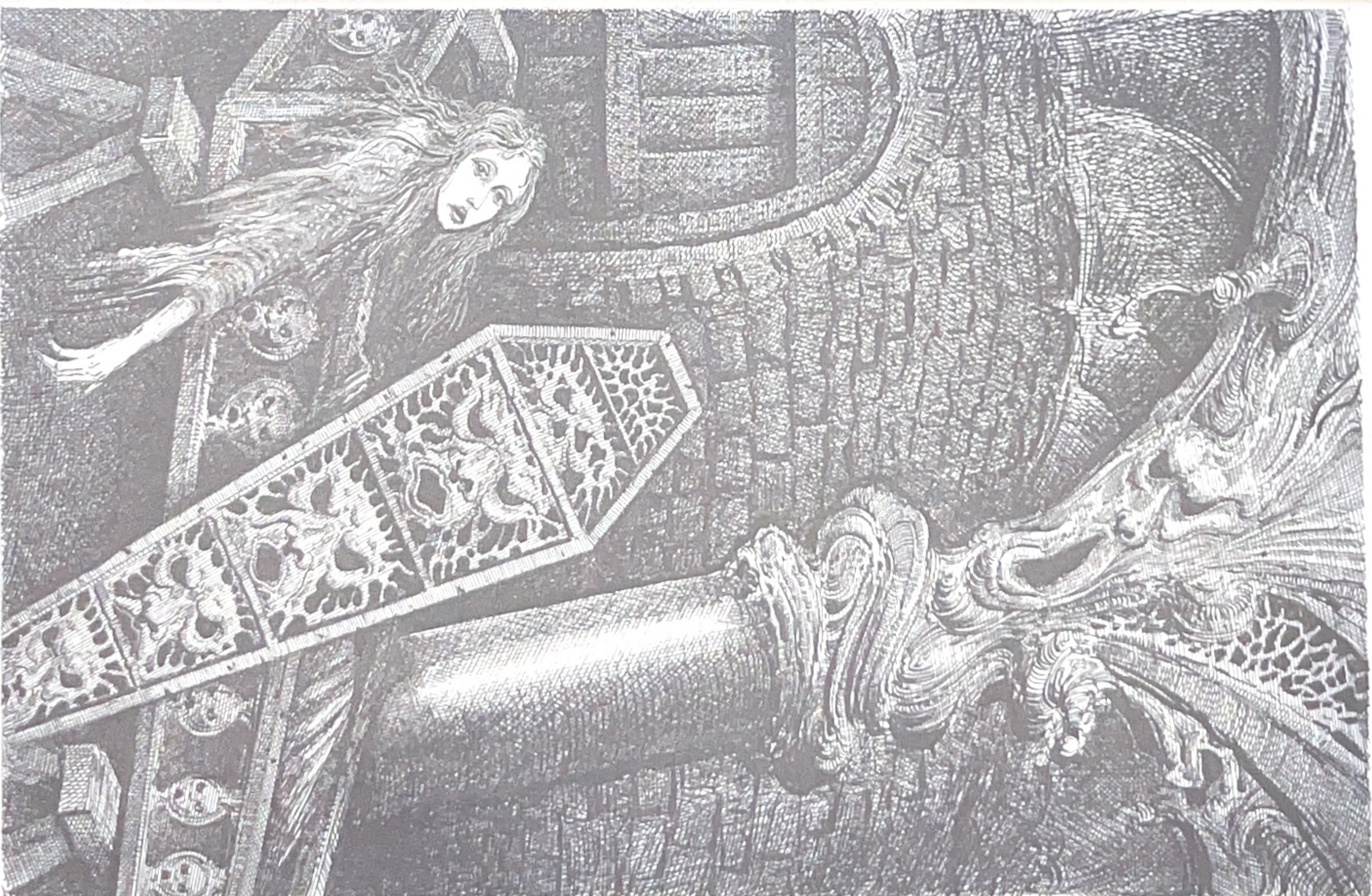
hear a cry. It was low and far away, but it was a long screaming sound – just like the one described in the book.

Although I was feeling so nervous, I tried hard to hide my terror. I was not sure if Usher had heard the sounds that I had heard. In the last few minutes he had moved and was now sitting with his face towards the door. But I could see that his lips were shaking and his body was moving gently from side to side. I continued reading the story:

And now Ethelred, after he had killed the dragon, turned and saw in front of him a palace of gold with tall gates of shining silver in the walls. Bravely, Ethelred ran towards the palace, but the shining silver gates did not wait for his coming and fell to the ground at his feet with a great and terrible ringing sound.

As I read these words, I heard clearly the loud, heavy sound of metal falling. I jumped to my feet, but Usher sat in his seat and did not move. I ran towards him. He was looking straight in front of him and his face was like stone. As I placed my hand on his arm, his body began to shake. A sickly smile came over his lips, and he spoke in a low hurried voice. He did not seem to realize that I was there. I put my head close to his to catch his words.

'Don't I hear it? – yes, I hear it, and I *have* heard it. For many minutes, many hours, many days I have heard it – but I was too frightened, too frightened to speak. *We have put her alive into her coffin!* Did I not tell you that I could hear even the softest sound? I tell you now that I could move in the coffin. I heard the sounds many days ago, but my terror was too great – *I could not speak!* And now tonight



'WE HAVE PUT HER ALIVE INTO HER COFFIN!'

—when you read about Ethelred breaking the old man's door, about the cry of the dragon, and the falling of the gates — it was, in fact, the breaking of her coffin, the scream of metal as she broke open the vault, and the ringing crash as the metal door fell to the floor! Oh, where can I escape to? Is she hurrying towards me at this very minute? Is that her angry footstep that I can hear on the stairs? Can I hear the heavy and terrible beating of her heart? MADMAN!

He jumped up and shouted, screaming out his words like a man dying in terror. 'MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT AT THIS MINUTE SHE IS STANDING OUTSIDE THIS DOOR!'

As he screamed these words, the heavy door was thrown open by the strong wind. There, outside the door, dressed in the white clothes of the dead, stood the tall figure of the Lady Madeleine of Usher. There was blood on her hands, her arms, her torn white clothes. Every part of her body showed the marks of her long fight to escape from the coffin. For a moment she stood there shaking, moving slowly from side to side. Then with a low cry she fell heavily onto her brother. And in the moment of her now final death, he fell with her to the floor — a dead man, killed by his own terror.

From that room, and from that house, I ran in horror. Outside, the storm was still violent and as I ran past the lake, a sudden wild light shone around me. I turned to see where this strange light was coming from. It was the moon, a full, blood-red moon, shining through a narrow crack in the walls of the house. It was the crack which started at the roof of the building and went right down to the ground. As I watched, the crack grew larger, the wind grew wilder



*It was the moon, a full, blood-red moon,
shining through a crack in the walls.*

—now I could see the full circle of the blood-red moon, and the great walls of the house breaking and falling. There was a long shouting sound, like the voice of a thousand waters, and the deep dark lake closed over the broken pieces of the House of Usher.