

April 2005: Usher II, Ray Bradbury

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“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. . . .”

Mr. William Stendahl paused in his quotation. There, upon a low black hill, stood the House, its cornerstone bearing the inscription 2005 A.D.

Mr. Bigelow, the architect, said, “It’s completed. Here’s the key, Mr. Stendahl.”

The two men stood together silently in the quiet autumn afternoon. Blueprints rustled on the raven grass at their feet.

“The House of Usher,” said Mr. Stendahl with pleasure. “Planned, built, bought, paid for. Wouldn’t Mr. Poe be delighted?”

Mr. Bigelow squinted. “Is it everything you wanted, sir?”
“Yes!”

“Is the color right? Is it desolate and terrible?”
“Very desolate, very terrible!”

“The walls are—bleak?”
“Amazingly so!”
“The tarn, is it ‘black and lurid’ enough?”

“Most incredibly black and lurid.”

“And the sedge—we’ve dyed it, you know—is it the proper gray and ebon?”

“Hideous!”

Mr. Bigelow consulted his architectural plans. From these he quoted in part: “Does the whole structure cause an ‘iciness, a sickening of the heart, a dreariness of thought’? The House, the lake, the land, Mr. Stendahl?”

“Mr. Bigelow, it’s worth every penny! My God, it’s beautiful!”

“Thank you. I had to work in total ignorance. Thank the Lord you had your own private rockets or we’d never have been allowed to bring most of the equipment through. You notice, it’s always twilight here, this land, always October, barren, sterile, dead. It took a bit of doing. We killed everything.

Ten thousand tons of DDT. Not a snake, frog, or Martian fly left! Twilight always, Mr. Stendahl; I’m proud of that. There are machines, hidden, which blot out the sun. It’s always properly ‘dreary.’”

Stendahl drank it in, the dreariness, the oppression, the fetid vapors, the whole “atmosphere,” so delicately contrived and fitted. And that House! That crumbling horror, that evil lake, the fungi, the extensive decay! Plastic or otherwise, who could guess?

He looked at the autumn sky. Somewhere above, beyond, far off, was the sun. Somewhere it was the month of April on the planet Mars, a yellow month with a blue sky. Somewhere above, the rockets burned down to civilize a beautifully dead planet. The sound of their screaming passage was muffled by this dim, soundproofed world, this ancient autumn world.

“Now that my job’s done,” said Mr. Bigelow uneasily, “I feel free to ask what you’re going to do with all this.”

“With Usher? Haven’t you guessed?”

“No.”

“Does the name Usher mean nothing to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, what about this name: Edgar Allan Poe?”

Mr. Bigelow shook his head.

“Of course.” Stendahl snorted delicately, a combination of dismay and contempt. “How could I expect you to know blessed Mr. Poe? He died a long while ago, before Lincoln. All of his books were burned in the Great Fire. That’s thirty years ago—1975.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Bigelow wisely. “One of those!”

“Yes, one of those, Bigelow. He and Lovecraft and Hawthorne and Ambrose Bierce and all the tales of terror and fantasy and horror and, for that matter, tales of the future were burned. Heartlessly. They passed a law. Oh, it started very small. In 1950 and ’60 it was a grain of sand.

They began by controlling books of cartoons and then detective books and, of course, films, one way or another, one group or another, political bias, religious prejudice, union pressures; there was always a minority afraid of something, and a great majority afraid of the dark, afraid of the future, afraid of the past, afraid of the present, afraid of themselves and shadows of themselves.”

“I see.”

“Afraid of the word ‘politics’ (which eventually became a synonym for Communism among the more reactionary elements, so I hear, and it was worth your life to use the word!), and with a screw tightened here, a bolt fastened there, a push, a pull, a yank, art and literature were soon like a great twine of taffy strung about, being twisted in braids and tied in knots and thrown in all directions, until there was no more resiliency and no more savor to it.

Then the film cameras chopped short and the theaters turned dark, and the print presses trickled down from a great Niagara of reading matter to a mere innocuous dripping of ‘pure’ material. Oh, the word ‘escape’ was radical, too, I tell you!”

“Was it?”

“It was! Every man, they said, must face reality. Must face the Here and Now! Everything that was not so must go. All the beautiful literary lies and flights of fancy must be shot in mid-air!

So they lined them up against a library wall one Sunday morning thirty years ago, in 1975; they lined them up, St. Nicholas and the Headless Horseman and Snow White and Rumpelstiltskin and Mother Goose—oh, what a wailing!—and shot them down, and burned the paper castles and the fairy frogs and old kings and the people who lived happily ever after (for of course it was a fact that nobody lived happily ever after!), and Once Upon A Time became No More!

And they spread the ashes of the Phantom Rickshaw with the rubble of the Land of Oz; they filleted the bones of Glinda the Good and Ozma and shattered Polychrome in a spectroscope and served Jack Pumpkinhead with meringue at the Biologists’ Ball! The Beanstalk died in a bramble of red tape! Sleeping Beauty awoke at the kiss of a scientist and expired at the fatal puncture of his syringe.

And they made Alice drink something from a bottle which reduced her to a size where she could no longer cry ‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ and they gave the Looking Glass one hammer blow to smash it and every Red King and Oyster away!”

He clenched his fists. Lord, how immediate it was! His face was red and he was gasping for breath.

As for Mr. Bigelow, he was astounded at this long explosion. He blinked and at last said, “Sorry. Don’t know what you’re talking about. Just names to me. From what I hear, the Burning was a good thing.”

“Get out!” screamed Stendahl. “You’ve done your job, now let me alone, you idiot!”

Mr. Bigelow summoned his carpenters and went away.

Mr. Stendahl stood alone before his House.

“Listen here,” he said to the unseen rockets. “I came to Mars to get away from you Clean-Minded people, but you’re flocking in thicker every day, like flies to offal. So I’m going to show you. I’m going to teach you a fine lesson for what you did to Mr. Poe on Earth. As of this day, beware. The House of Usher is open for business!”

He pushed a fist at the sky.

The rocket landed. A man stepped out jauntily. He glanced at the House, and his gray eyes were displeased and vexed. He strode across the moat to confront the small man there.

“Your name Stendahl?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Garrett, Investigator of Moral Climates.”

“So you finally got to Mars, you Moral Climate people? I wondered when you’d appear.”

“We arrived last week. We’ll soon have things as neat and tidy as Earth.” The man waved an identification card irritably toward the House. “Suppose you tell me about that place, Stendahl?”

“It’s a haunted castle, if you like.”

“I don’t like, Stendahl, I don’t like. The sound of that word ‘haunted.’”

“Simple enough. In this year of our Lord 2005 I have built a mechanical sanctuary. In it copper bats fly on electronic beams, brass rats scuttle in plastic cellars, robot skeletons dance; robot vampires, harlequins, wolves, and white phantoms, compounded of chemical and ingenuity, live here.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” said Garrett, smiling quietly. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to tear your place down.”

“I knew you’d come out as soon as you discovered what went on.”

“I’d have come sooner, but we at Moral Climates wanted to be sure of your intentions before we moved in. We can have the Dismantlers and Burning Crew here by supper. By midnight your place will be razed to

the cellar. Mr. Stendahl, I consider you somewhat of a fool, sir. Spending hard-earned money on a folly. Why, it must have cost you three million dollars—”

“Four million!

But, Mr. Garrett, I inherited twenty-five million when very young. I can afford to throw it about. Seems a dreadful shame, though, to have the House finished only an hour and have you race out with your Dismantlers. Couldn't you possibly let me play with my Toy for just, well, twenty-four hours?”

“You know the law. Strict to the letter. No books, no houses, nothing to be produced which in any way suggests ghosts, vampires, fairies, or any creature of the imagination.”

“You'll be burning Babbitts next!”

“You've caused us a lot of trouble, Mr. Stendahl. It's in the record. Twenty years ago. On Earth. You and your library.”

“Yes, me and my library. And a few others like me. Oh, Poe's been forgotten for many years now, and Oz and the other creatures. But I had my little cache. We had our libraries, a few private citizens, until you sent your men around with torches and incinerators and tore my fifty thousand books up and burned them.

Just as you put a stake through the heart of Halloween and told your film producers that if they made anything at all they would have to make and remake Ernest Hemingway. My God, how many times have I seen For Whom the Bell Tolls done! Thirty different versions. All realistic. Oh, realism! Oh, here, oh, now, oh hell!”

“It doesn't pay to be bitter!”

“Mr. Garrett, you must turn in a full report, mustn't you?”

“Yes.”

“Then, for curiosity's sake, you'd better come in and look around. It'll take only a minute.”

“All right. Lead the way. And no tricks. I've a gun with me.”

The door to the House of Usher creaked wide. A moist wind issued forth. There was an immense sighing and moaning, like a subterranean bellows breathing in the lost catacombs.

A rat pranced across the floor stones. Garrett, crying out, gave it a kick. It fell over, the rat did, and from its nylon fur streamed an incredible horde of metal fleas.

“Amazing!” Garrett bent to see.

An old witch sat in a niche, quivering her wax hands over some orange-and-blue tarot cards. She jerked her head and hissed through her toothless mouth at Garrett, tapping her greasy cards.

“Death!” she cried.

“Now that’s the sort of thing I mean,” said Garrett. “Deplorable!”
“I’ll let you burn her personally.”

“Will you, really?” Garrett was pleased. Then he frowned. “I must say you’re taking this all so well.”

“It was enough just to be able to create this place. To be able to say I did it. To say I nurtured a medieval atmosphere in a modern, incredulous world.”

“I’ve a somewhat reluctant admiration for your genius myself, sir.”
Garrett watched a mist drift by, whispering and whispering, shaped like a beautiful and nebulous woman. Down a moist corridor a machine whirled. Like the stuff from a cotton-candy centrifuge, mists sprang up and floated, murmuring, in the silent halls.

An ape appeared out of nowhere.

“Hold on!” cried Garrett.

“Don’t be afraid.” Stendahl tapped the animal’s black chest. “A robot. Copper skeleton and all, like the witch. See?” He stroked the fur, and under it metal tubing came to light.

“Yes.” Garrett put out a timid hand to pet the thing. “But why, Mr. Stendahl, why all this? What obsessed you?”

“Bureaucracy, Mr. Garrett. But I haven’t time to explain. The government will discover soon enough.” He nodded to the ape. “All right. Now.”

The ape killed Mr. Garrett.

“Are we almost ready, Pikes?”

Pikes looked up from the table. “Yes, sir.”

“You’ve done a splendid job.”

“Well, I’m paid for it, Mr. Stendahl,” said Pikes softly as he lifted the plastic eyelid of the robot and inserted the glass eyeball to fasten the rubberoid muscles neatly. “There.”

“The spitting image of Mr. Garrett.”

“What do we do with him, sir?” Pikes nodded at the slab where the real Mr. Garrett lay dead.

“Better burn him, Pikes. We wouldn’t want two Mr. Garretts, would we?”

Pikes wheeled Mr. Garrett to the brick incinerator. “Good-bye.” He pushed Mr. Garrett in and slammed the door.

Stendahl confronted the robot Garrett. “You have your orders, Garrett?”

“Yes, sir.” The robot sat up. “I’m to return to Moral Climates. I’ll file a complimentary report. Delay action for at least forty-eight hours. Say I’m investigating more fully.”

“Right, Garrett. Good-bye.”

The robot hurried out to Garrett’s rocket, got in, and flew away.

Stendahl turned. “Now, Pikes, we send the remainder of the invitations for tonight. I think we’ll have a jolly time, don’t you?”

“Considering we waited twenty years, quite jolly!”

They winked at each other.

Seven o'clock. Stendahl studied his watch. Almost time. He twirled the sherry glass in his hand. He sat quietly. Above him, among the oaken beams, the bats, their delicate copper bodies hidden under rubber flesh, blinked at him and shrieked. He raised his glass to them. "To our success."

Then he leaned back, closed his eyes, and considered the entire affair. How he would savor this in his old age. This paying back of the antiseptic government for its literary terrors and conflagrations. Oh, how the anger and hatred had grown in him through the years. Oh, how the plan had taken a slow shape in his numbed mind, until that day three years ago when he had met Pikes.

Ah yes, Pikes. Pikes with the bitterness in him as deep as a black, charred well of green acid. Who was Pikes? Only the greatest of them all! Pikes, the man of ten thousand faces, a fury, a smoke, a blue fog, a white rain, a bat, a gargoyle, a monster, that was Pikes! Better than Lon Chaney, the father? Stendahl ruminated. Night after night he had watched Chaney in the old, old films.

Yes, better than Chaney. Better than that other ancient mummer? What was his name? Karloff? Far better! Lugosi? The comparison was odious! No, there was only one Pikes, and he was a man stripped of his fantasies now, no place on Earth to go, no one to show off to. Forbidden even to perform for himself before a mirror!

Poor impossible, defeated Pikes! How must it have felt, Pikes, the night they seized your films, like entrails yanked from the camera, out of your guts, clutching them in roils and wads to stuff them up a stove to burn away?

Did it feel as bad as having some fifty thousand books annihilated with no recompense? Yes. Yes. Stendahl felt his hands grow cold with the senseless anger. So what more natural than they would one day talk over endless coffeepots into innumerable midnights, and out of all the talk and the bitter brewings would come—the House of Usher.

A great church bell rang. The guests were arriving.

Smiling, he went to greet them.

Full grown without memory, the robots waited. In green silks the color of forest pools, in silks the color of frog and fern, they waited. In yellow hair the color of the sun and sand, the robots waited. Oiled, with tube bones cut from bronze and sunk in gelatin, the robots lay. In coffins for the not dead and not alive, in planked boxes, the metronomes waited to be set in motion. There was a smell of lubrication and lathed brass.

There was a silence of the tomb yard. Sexed but sexless, the robots. Named but unnamed, and borrowing from humans everything but humanity, the robots stared at the nailed lids of their labeled F.O.B. boxes, in a death that was not even a death, for there had never been a life. And now there was a vast screaming of yanked nails.

Now there was a lifting of lids. Now there were shadows on the boxes and the pressure of a hand squirting oil from a can. Now one clock was set in motion, a faint ticking. Now another and another, until this was an immense clock shop, purring. The marble eyes rolled wide their rubber lids. The nostrils winked.

The robots, clothed in hair of ape and white of rabbit, arose: Tweedledum following Tweedledee, Mock-Turtle, Dormouse, drowned bodies from the sea compounded of salt and whiteweed, swaying; hanging blue-throated men with turned-up, clam-flesh eyes, and creatures of ice and burning tinsel, loam-dwarfs and pepper-elves, Tik-Tok, Ruggedo, St. Nicholas with a self-made snow flurry blowing on before him, Bluebeard with whiskers like acetylene flame, and sulfur clouds from which green fire snouts protruded, and, in scaly and gigantic serpentine, a dragon with a furnace in its belly reeled out the door with a scream, a tick, a bellow, a silence, a rush, a wind. Ten thousand lids fell back.

The clock shop moved out into Usher. The night was enchanted.

A warm breeze came over the land. The guest rockets, burning the sky and turning the weather from autumn to spring, arrived.

The men stepped out in evening clothes and the women stepped out after them, their hair coiffed up in elaborate detail.

“So that’s Usher!”

“But where’s the door?”

At this moment Stendahl appeared. The women laughed and chattered. Mr. Stendahl raised a hand to quiet them. Turning, he looked up to a high castle window and called:

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.”

And from above, a beautiful maiden leaned out upon the night wind and let down her golden hair. And the hair twined and blew and became a ladder upon which the guests might ascend, laughing, into the House.

What eminent sociologists! What clever psychologists! What tremendously important politicians, bacteriologists, and neurologists! There they stood, within the dank walls.

“Welcome, all of you!”

Mr. Tryon, Mr. Owen, Mr. Dunne, Mr. Lang, Mr. Steffens, Mr. Fletcher, and a double-dozen more.

“Come in, come in!”

Miss Gibbs, Miss Pope, Miss Churchil, Miss Blunt, Miss Drummond, and a score of other women, glittering.

Eminent, eminent people, one and all, members of the Society for the Prevention of Fantasy, advocators of the banishment of Halloween and Guy Fawkes, killers of bats, burners of books, bearers of torches; good clean citizens, every one, who had waited until the rough men had come up and buried the Martians and cleansed the cities and built the towns and repaired the highways and made everything safe.

And then, with everything well on its way to Safety, the Spoil-Funs, the people with mercurochrome for blood and iodine-colored eyes, came now to set up their Moral Climates and dole out goodness to everyone. And they were his friends! Yes, carefully, carefully, he had met and befriended each of them on Earth in the last year!
“Welcome to the vasty halls of Death!” he cried.

“Hello, Stendahl, what is all this?”

“You’ll see. Everyone off with their clothes. You’ll find booths to one side there. Change into costumes you find there. Men on this side, women on that.”

The people stood uneasily about.

“I don’t know if we should stay,” said Miss Pope. “I don’t like the looks of this. It verges on—blasphemy.”

“Nonsense, a costume ball!”

“Seems quite illegal.” Mr. Steffens sniffed about.

“Come off it.” Stendahl laughed. “Enjoy yourselves. Tomorrow it’ll be a ruin. Get in the booths!”

The House blazed with life and color; harlequins rang by with belled caps and white mice danced miniature quadrilles to the music of dwarfs who tickled tiny fiddles with tiny bows, and flags rippled from scorched beams while bats flew in clouds about gargoyle mouths which spouted down wine, cool, wild, and foaming. A creek wandered through the seven rooms of the masked ball.

Guests sipped and found it to be sherry. Guests poured from the booths, transformed from one age into another, their faces covered with dominoes, the very act of putting on a mask revoking all their licenses to pick a quarrel with fantasy and horror. The women swept about in red gowns, laughing.

The men danced them attendance. And on the walls were shadows with no people to throw them, and here or there were mirrors in which no image showed. “All of us vampires!” laughed Mr. Fletcher. “Dead!”

There were seven rooms, each a different color, one blue, one purple, one green, one orange, another white, the sixth violet, and the seventh shrouded in black velvet. And in the black room was an ebony clock which struck the hour loud.

And through these rooms the guests ran, drunk at last, among the robot fantasies, amid the Dormice and Mad Hatters, the Trolls and Giants, the Black Cats and White Queens, and under their dancing feet the floor gave off the massive pumping beat of a hidden and telltale heart.

“Mr. Stendahl!”

A whisper.

“Mr. Stendahl!”

A monster with the face of Death stood at his elbow. It was Pikes. “I must see you alone.”

“What is it?”

“Here.” Pikes held out a skeleton hand. In it were a few half-melted, charred wheels, nuts, cogs, bolts.

Stendahl looked at them for a long moment. Then he drew Pikes into a corridor. “Garrett?” he whispered.

Pikes nodded. “He sent a robot in his place. Cleaning out the incinerator a moment ago, I found these.”

They both stared at the fateful cogs for a time.

“This means the police will be here any minute,” said Pikes. “Our plan will be ruined.”

“I don’t know.” Stendahl glanced in at the whirling yellow and blue and orange people. The music swept through the misting halls. “I should have guessed Garrett wouldn’t be fool enough to come in person. But wait!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing the matter. Garrett sent a robot to us. Well, we sent one back. Unless he checks closely, he won’t notice the switch.”

“Of course!”

“Next time he’ll come himself. Now that he thinks it’s safe. Why, he might be at the door any minute, in person! More wine, Pikes!”
The great bell rang.

“There he is now, I’ll bet you. Go let Mr. Garrett in.”

Rapunzel let down her golden hair.

“Mr. Stendahl?”

“Mr. Garrett. The real Mr. Garrett?”

“The same.” Garrett eyed the dank walls and the whirling people. “I thought I’d better come see for myself. You can’t depend on robots. Other people’s robots, especially. I also took the precaution of summoning the Dismantlers. They’ll be here in one hour to knock the props out from under this horrible place.”

Stendahl bowed. “Thanks for telling me.” He waved his hand. “In the meantime, you might as well enjoy this. A little wine?”

“No, thank you. What’s going on? How low can a man sink?”

“See for yourself, Mr. Garrett.”

“Murder,” said Garrett.

“Murder most foul,” said Stendahl.

A woman screamed. Miss Pope ran up, her face the color of a cheese.

“The most horrid thing just happened! I saw Miss Blunt strangled by an ape and stuffed up a chimney!”

They looked and saw the long yellow hair trailing down from the flue. Garrett cried out.

“Horrid!” sobbed Miss Pope, and then ceased crying. She blinked and turned. “Miss Blunt!”

“Yes,” said Miss Blunt, standing there.

“But I just saw you crammed up the flue!”

“No,” laughed Miss Blunt. “A robot of myself. A clever facsimile!”

“But, but . . .”

“Don’t cry, darling. I’m quite all right. Let me look at myself. Well, so there I am! Up the chimney. Like you said. Isn’t that funny?”

Miss Blunt walked away, laughing.

“Have a drink, Garrett?”

“I believe I will. That unnerved me. My God, what a place. This does deserve tearing down. For a moment there . . .”

Garrett drank.

Another scream. Mr. Steffens, borne upon the shoulders of four white rabbits, was carried down a flight of stairs which magically appeared in the floor. Into a pit went Mr. Steffens, where, bound and tied, he was left to face the advancing razor steel of a great pendulum which now whirled down, down, closer and closer to his outraged body.

“Is that me down there?” said Mr. Steffens, appearing at Garrett’s elbow. He bent over the pit. “How strange, how odd, to see yourself die.”

The pendulum made a final stroke.

“How realistic,” said Mr. Steffens, turning away.

“Another drink, Mr. Garrett?”

“Yes, please.”

“It won’t be long. The Dismantlers will be here.”

“Thank God!”

And for a third time, a scream.

“What now?” said Garrett apprehensively.

“It’s my turn,” said Miss Drummond. “Look.”

And a second Miss Drummond, shrieking, was nailed into a coffin and thrust into the raw earth under the floor.

“Why, I remember that,” gasped the Investigator of Moral Climates.
“From the old forbidden books. The Premature Burial. And the others.
The Pit, the Pendulum, and the ape, the chimney, the Murders in the
Rue Morgue. In a book I burned, yes!”

“Another drink, Garrett. Here, hold your glass steady.”
“My lord, you have an imagination, haven’t you?”

They stood and watched five others die, one in the mouth of a dragon,
the others thrown off into the black tarn, sinking and vanishing.
“Would you like to see what we have planned for you?” asked
Stendahl.

“Certainly,” said Garrett. “What’s the difference? We’ll blow the whole
damn thing up, anyway. You’re nasty.”
“Come along then. This way.”

And he led Garrett down into the floor, through numerous passages
and down again upon spiral stairs into the earth, into the catacombs.
“What do you want to show me down here?” said Garrett.

“Yourself killed.”
“A duplicate?”
“Yes. And also something else.”

“What?”
“The Amontillado,” said Stendahl, going ahead with a blazing lantern
which he held high. Skeletons froze half out of coffin lids. Garrett held
his hand to his nose, his face disgusted.
“The what?”
“Haven’t you ever heard of the Amontillado?”
“No!”
“Don’t you recognize this?” Stendahl pointed to a cell.
“Should I?”

“Or this?” Stendahl produced a trowel from under his cape smiling.

“What’s that thing?”

“Come,” said Stendahl.

They stepped into the cell. In the dark, Stendahl affixed the chains to the half-drunken man.

“For God’s sake, what are you doing?” shouted Garrett, rattling about. “I’m being ironic. Don’t interrupt a man in the midst of being ironic, it’s not polite. There!”

“You’ve locked me in chains!”

“So I have.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Leave you here.”

“You’re joking.”

“A very good joke.”

“Where’s my duplicate? Don’t we see him killed?”

“There is no duplicate.”

“But the others?”

“The others are dead. The ones you saw killed were the real people. The duplicates, the robots, stood by and watched.”

Garrett said nothing.

“Now you’re supposed to say, ‘For the love of God, Montresor!’” said Stendahl. “And I will reply, ‘Yes, for the love of God.’ Won’t you say it? Come on. Say it.”

“You fool.”

“Must I coax you? Say it. Say ‘For the love of God, Montresor!’”

“I won’t, you idiot. Get me out of here.” He was sober now.

“Here. Put this on.” Stendahl tossed in something that belled and rang.

“What is it?”

“A cap and bells. Put it on and I might let you out.”

“Stendahl!”

“Put it on, I said!”

Garrett obeyed. The bells tinkled.

“Don’t you have a feeling that this has all happened before?” inquired Stendahl, setting to work with trowel and mortar and brick now.

“What’re you doing?”

“Walling you in. Here’s one row. Here’s another.”

“You’re insane!”

“I won’t argue that point.”

“You’ll be prosecuted for this!”

He tapped a brick and placed it on the wet mortar, humming.

Now there was a thrashing and pounding and a crying out from within the darkening place. The bricks rose higher. “More thrashing, please,” said Stendahl. “Let’s make it a good show.”

“Let me out, let me out!”

There was one last brick to shove into place. The screaming was continuous.

“Garrett?” called Stendahl softly. Garrett silenced himself. “Garrett,” said Stendahl, “do you know why I’ve done this to you? Because you burned Mr. Poe’s books without really reading them. You took other people’s advice that they needed burning. Otherwise you’d have realized what I was going to do to you when we came down here a moment ago. Ignorance is fatal, Mr. Garrett.”

Garrett was silent.

“I want this to be perfect,” said Stendahl, holding his lantern up so its light penetrated in upon the slumped figure. “Jingle your bells softly.” The bells rustled. “Now, if you’ll please say, ‘For the love of God, Montresor,’ I might let you free.”

The man’s face came up in the light. There was a hesitation. Then grotesquely the man said, “For the love of God, Montresor.”

“Ah,” said Stendahl, eyes closed. He shoved the last brick into place and mortared it tight. “Requiescat in pace, dear friend.”
He hastened from the catacomb.

In the seven rooms the sound of a midnight clock brought everything to a halt.

The Red Death appeared.

Stendahl turned for a moment at the door to watch. And then he ran out of the great House, across the moat, to where a helicopter waited.
“Ready, Pikes?”

“Ready.”

“There it goes!”

They looked at the great House, smiling. It began to crack down the middle, as with an earthquake, and as Stendahl watched the magnificent sight he heard Pikes reciting behind him in a low, cadenced voice:

“... my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher.”

The helicopter rose over the steaming lake and flew into the west.

The End