

LIGEIA

Edgar Allen Poe

**“Man doth not yield himself to the angels,
nor unto death utterly, save only through
the weakness of his feeble will.”**

—Joseph Glanvill—

I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering. Or perhaps I cannot now bring these points to mind, because in truth the character of my beloved made its way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown. Yet I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine river. Of her family—I have surely heard her speak and now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have never known the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my studies and finally the wife of my bosom. Was it a playful trick on the part of my Ligeia? Or was it a test of my strength of affection that I should start no inquiries upon this point? Or was it rather a whim of my own—a wildly romantic offering on the shrine of the most passionate devotion?

There is one dear topic, however, on which my memory fails me not. It is the person of Ligeia. In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even emaciated. I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease of her demeanor, or the ightness of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow. I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study except by the dear music of her low, sweet voice as she placed her marble hand upon my shoulder. In beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her. It was the radiance of an opium-dream—an airy and spirit-lifting vision. I examined the contour of the lofty and pale forehead. It was faultless, the skin rivaling the purest ivory—and then the raven-black, glossy, naturally-curling tresses. I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose—and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I beheld a similar perfection. I regarded the sweet mouth. Here was indeed the triumph of all things heavenly—the magnificent turn of the short, upper lip. The soft, voluptuous slumber of the under—the dimples which frolicked, and the color which spoke—the teeth glancing back every ray of the holy light which fell upon them in her serene and placid smile. Then I peered into the large eyes of Ligeia. They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. The



hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black, and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length. The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! Those large, those shining, those divine orbs! They became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers....

How poignant, then, was the grief some years later. Ligeia grew ill. The wild eyes blazed with brilliance. The pale fingers became of the transparent, waxen hue of the grave, and the blue veins upon the lofty forehead swelled and sank with the tides of the gentle emotion. I saw that she must die—and I struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael, the angel of death. And the struggles of the passionate wife were, to my astonishment, even more energetic than my own. Words cannot convey an idea of the fierce resistance with which she wrestled with the Shadow. Yet not until the last instant, amid the most convulsive writhings of her fierce spirit, was shaken the external placidity of her demeanor. Her voice grew more gentle—grew more low. For long hours, holding my hand, she poured out before me the overflowing of a heart whose more than passionate devotion amounted to idolatry. How had I deserved to be so blessed by such confessions? How had I deserved to be so cursed with the removal of my beloved in the hour of her making them?

"O God!" half-shrieked Ligeia, leaping to her feet and extending her arms aloft with a spasmodic movement. "O God! O Divine Father! Shall these things be undeviatingly so? Shall this Conquering Worm not once be conquered? Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." And now, as if exhausted with emotion, she suffered her white arms to fall and returned solemnly to her bed of death. And as she breathed her last sighs, there came mingled with them a low murmur from her lips. I bent to them my ear and distinguished, again, the concluding words—"Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."

She died, and I, crushed into the very dust with sorrow, could no longer endure the lonely desolation of my dwelling in the dim and decaying city by the Rhine. I had no lack of what the world calls wealth. After a few months of weary and aimless wandering, I purchased, and put in some repair, an abbey in one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England. The gloomy and dreary grandeur of the building had much in unison with the feelings of utter abandonment which had driven me into that remote and unsocial region of the country. Yet although the external abbey, with its verdant decay hanging about it, suffered but little alteration, I gave way to a display of more than regal magnificence within. Alas, I feel how much madness might have been discovered in the gorgeous and fantastic draperies, in the solemn carvings of Egypt, in the wild cornices and furniture, in the crazed patterns of the carpets of tufted gold! I had become a bounden slave in the trammels of opium, and my labors and my orders had taken a coloring from my dreams. But these absurdities must not pause to detail. Let me

speak only of that one chamber, ever accursed, whither in a moment of mental alienation, I led from the altar as my bride—as the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia—the fair-haired and blue-eyed Lady Rowena of Tremaine.

The room lay in a high turret of the castellated abbey, was pentagonal in shape, and of voluminous size. Occupying the whole southern face of the pentagon was the sole window—an immense sheet of unbroken glass—a single pane, tinted of a leaden hue so that the rays of either the sun or moon passing through it fell with a ghastly luster on the objects within. In each of the angles of the chamber stood on end a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over by Luxor, with their aged lids full of immemorial sculpture. But in the draping of the apartment lay the chief fantasy of all. The lofty walls, gigantic in height were hung from summit to foot with heavy and massive-looking tapestries. The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over with strange figures, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. The figures were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities, but upon a farther advance, step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms. The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by a strong, continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole room.

In halls such as these—in a bridal chamber such as this—I passed with the Lady of Tremaine the unhallowed hours of the first month of our marriage. My wife dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper. She shunned me and loved me but little, but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man. My memory flew back to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I reveled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, ethereal nature, of her passionate, idolatrous love. In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug) I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned upon the earth.

About the beginning of the second month of the marriage, the Lady Rowena was attacked with sudden illness from which her recovery was slow. The fever which consumed her rendered her nights uneasy. In her perturbed state of half-slumber, she spoke of sounds and of motions, in and about the chamber of the turret, which I concluded had no origin save in the distemper of her fancy or in the phantasmagoric influences of the chamber itself. She became at length convalescent—finally well. Yet but a brief period elapsed, ere a second more violent disorder again threw her upon a bed of suffering. And from this attack, her frame, at all times feeble, never altogether recovered. Her illnesses defied the knowledge and the great efforts of her physicians. I observed a similar increase in the nervous irritation of her temperament, and in her excitability by trivial causes of fear. She spoke more frequently and of the sounds—of the slight sounds—and of the unusual motions among the tapestries.

One night, near the closing in of September, she pressed this distressing subject

with more than usual emphasis. She had just awakened from an unquiet slumber, and I had been watching the workings of her emaciated countenance. I sat by the side of her ebony bed. She partly arose and spoke in an earnest, low whisper of sounds which she then heard, but which I could not hear—of motions, which she then saw, but which I could not perceive. The wind was rushing hurriedly behind the tapestries, and I wished to show her that those almost inarticulate breathings, and those very gentle variations of the figures upon the wall, were but the natural effects of that customary rushing of the wind. (Let me confess it, I could not believe what I said.) But a deadly pallor overspreading her face had proved to me that my exertions to reassure her would be fruitless. She appeared to be fainting, and no attendants were within call. I remembered where was deposited a decanter of light wine which had been ordered by her physicians, and I hastened across the chamber to obtain it.

But, as I stepped beneath the light, two circumstances of a startling nature attracted my attention. I had felt that some invisible object had passed lightly by my person, and I saw that there lay upon the golden carpet, in the very middle of the rich luster thrown from the light, a shadow—a faint, indefinite shadow of angelic aspect. But I was wild with the excitement from a dose of opium and heeded these things but little and did not speak of them to Rowena. Having found the wine, I recrossed the chamber, and poured out a gobletful, which I held to the lips of the fainting lady. She had now partially recovered, however, and took the vessel herself, while I sank upon an ottoman with my eyes fastened upon her person. It was then that I became distinctly aware of a gentle footfall upon the carpet near the couch; and in a second thereafter, as Rowena was in the act of raising the wine to her lips, I saw (or may have dreamed that I saw) fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby-colored fluid. If this I saw—not so Rowena. She swallowed the wine unhesitatingly.

Immediately following the fall of the ruby-drops, a rapid change for the worse took place in my wife, so that, on the third subsequent night, the hands of her servants prepared her for the tomb, and on the fourth, I sat alone, with her shrouded body, in that fantastic chamber which had received her as my bride.

Wild visions, opium-induced, flitted shadow-like before me. I gazed with unquiet eye upon the sarcophagi in the angles of the room, upon the varying figures of the drapery, and upon the writhing of the light overhead. My eyes then fell to the spot beneath the glare of the light where I had seen the faint traces of the shadow. It was there no longer; and breathing with greater freedom, I turned my glances to the pallid and rigid figure upon the bed. Then rushed upon me a thousand memories of Ligeia—and then came back upon my heart, the whole of that unutterable woe. The night waned, and still, with a bosom full of bitter thoughts of my supremely beloved, I remained gazing upon the body of Rowena.

It might have been midnight when a sob, low, gentle, but very distinct, startled me from my trance. I felt that it came from the bed of ebony—the bed of death. I listened in superstitious terror—but there was no repetition of the sound. I strained my vision to detect any motion in the corpse—but there was not the slightest to be seen. Yet

I could not have been deceived. I had heard the noise, however faint, and my soul was awakened within me. I kept my attention riveted upon the body. Many minutes elapsed. At length it became evident that a slight, a very feeble, and barely noticeable tinge of color had flushed up within the cheeks, and along the sunken small veins of the eyelids. I felt my heart cease to beat, my limbs grow rigid where I sat. I could no longer doubt that Rowena still lived. It was necessary that something be done, yet the turret was altogether apart from the portion of the abbey tenanted by the servants. There were none within call. I had no means of summoning them to my aid without leaving the room for many minutes—and this I could not venture to do. I therefore struggled alone in my endeavors to call back the spirit ill hovering. In a short period it was certain, however, that a relapse had taken place; the color disappeared from both eyelid and cheek, leaving a wanness even more than that of marble. The lips became doubly shriveled and pinched up in the ghastly expression of death. A repulsive clamminess and coldness overspread rapidly the surface of the body. I fell back with a shudder upon the couch and again gave myself up to passionate waking visions of Ligeia.

An hour thus elapsed when I was a second time aware of some vague sound issuing from the region of the bed. I listened. The sound came again. It was a sigh. Rushing to the corpse, I distinctly saw a tremor upon the lips. In a minute afterward they relaxed, disclosing a bright line of the pearly teeth. There was now a partial glow upon the forehead and upon the cheek and throat. A perceptible warmth pervaded the whole frame. There was even a slight pulsation at the heart. The lady lived, and with redoubled ardor I betook myself to the task of restoration. I rubbed and bathed the temples and the hands and used every tactic which experience, and medical reading could suggest. But in vain. Suddenly, the color fled, the pulsation ceased, the lips resumed the expression of the dead, and, in an instant afterward, the whole body took upon itself the icy chilliness, the livid hue, the intense rigidity, the sunken outline of a tenant of the tomb.

And again I sunk into visions of Ligeia — and again there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed. But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night? Time after time, until near the period of the gray dawn, this hideous drama of revivification was repeated. Each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death. Each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe. Each struggle was succeeded by a wild change in the personal appearance of the corpse.

The greater part of the fearful night had worn away, and she who had been dead, once again stirred more vigorously than before. I had long ceased to struggle or to move, and remained sitting rigidly upon the ottoman, a helpless prey to a whirl of violent emotions. The corpse, I repeat, stirred, and now more vigorously than before. The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance—the limbs relaxed—and, save that the eyelids were yet pressed heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their funerary character to the figure, I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of death. Arising from the bed, tottering with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one

bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced boldly into the middle of the room.

I trembled not. I stirred not—for the figure had chilled me into stone. I stirred not, but gazed upon the apparition. Could it indeed be the living Rowena who confronted me? Could it indeed be Rowena at all—the fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena of Tremaine? Why should I doubt it? The bandage lay heavily about the mouth, and the cheeks. Yes, these might indeed be the fair cheeks of the living Lady of Tremaine. And the chin, with its dimples, might it not be hers? But had she then grown taller since her illness? What madness seized me with that thought? In one bound, I reached her feet. Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly shrouds which had confined it, and there streamed forth huge masses of long and disheveled hair. It was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight! And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. "Here then, at least," I shrieked aloud, "can I never be mistaken! These are the full and the black and the wild eyes of my lost love—of the Lady Ligeia!"