

Peter Hammill

"Act Three"

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(Immediately afterwards, Madeline Usher enters, in a trance)

MADELINE Carriages at seven
I shall wear the flower he gave me
It's so cold here
deep beneath the lapping water...
The water
The water
My love
Head against his shoulder,
'cross the lawn I hear the music...
Silent blackness,
In the lake I'm sinking slowly...
Oh, how lovely,
nothing could be more becoming...
Underwater,
floating in the icy darkness...
Count the candles
'May I dance with you this evening?'...
On the surface
Swans are feeding high above me...
Hold him tightly
round and round the floor we're spinning
Breathing water
I am drowning
Watch the sun rise
driving home across the meadows...
All is darkness
I can feel myself dissolving
The water
The water
The darkness
The darkness
My love
Head against his shoulder
Floating in the icy darkness
Hold him tightly
I can feel myself dissolving
Oh how lovely
Deep beneath the lapping water
Count the candles
I am drowning I am drowning

Count the candles
Floating in the icy darkness
Hold him tightly
I can feel myself dissolving
Oh how lovely
Deep beneath the lapping water
Count the candles
I am drowning
Oh how lovely
I am drowning I am drowning
Oh how lovely
Oh how lovely
Oh how lovely
MONTRESOR Stop, Madeline, look at me!
My god, man, what is wrong with her?
USHER Yes, it's right you should know,
She is dying!
I have not dared to speak of it.
A chronic catalepsy had drained her of her youth.
I have watched her waste away and could do nothing!
A period of health is followed by sudden coma,
death-like sleep.
It can last a full day or more,
no movement, no colour, no flame in the cheeks.
MONTRESOR What, then of these dreaming visions?
USHER The recovery, ah, this is even worse!
She rises and moves about the house
but her mind still sleeps...
You see her now a mindless ghost:
Beautiful, dead eyes stare in sleep, unrecognising.
She speaks in dreams, sees only dreams,
she haunts the house in hideous sleepwalking
and may not be restrained, for like some automaton
she tirelessly thrusts and tears herself
against her fetters,
heedless of injury.
And so she walks and then she wakes,
remembering nothing, so weak that she can
barely build up strength before she is struck down
again.
Month after month each attack worse than the last.
Death will not wait long.
Her final days are flickering past.
Dear God,
helpless,
helpless!
MONTRESOR But what is the word from her doctors?
Do they hold out no hope, nor offer any treatment?
USHER MONTRESOR CHORUS
They do not understand
her case

and cannot treat a case
they do not understand
He does not understand
You're dealing with a case
Who is her doctor,
a specialist I trust?
Yes indeed, one of
the foremost rank
You're dealing
with a case
Then he will help her,
Montresor oh, yes,
no more of this he surely must You do not understand
now
no more talk He does not
of cures, please, understand
Or of doctor.
I bless you concern,
but know that she
will walk no more tonight.
When she wakes soon
she will need my care.
I must be there, so,
dear friend, goodnight.
(Usher exits with Madeline, leaving Montresor alone.
The Herbalist enters)
THE HERBALIST Good evening, sir.
And you must be the friend of Mister Usher.
I'm so pleased to meet you, sir,
but have little time to spare
for knowledge such as mine is wanted everywhere.
In poor dwellings, yes, but some as great as Usher's.
My card...
MONTRESOR 'J. Ducrow, Esq. Herbalist,
Doctor of Natural Medicine'...
HERBALIST At you service, and it could be, sir,
that you have need of my panaceas now...
I have Mandrake juice that will slake any fever,
cures to convince you though you be an unbeliever
now...
Laugh - would you? - at these seeds of mine.
You question the cure's causes,
but Logic and Reason do not answer,
and Nature runs her courses.
I have purest poppy for the soundest of sleeps;
a pure cake of hemp plant
that's a warranted surcease of worldly sorrow.
Lying words will be believed
if perfumed by this pastil,
or my elixir's guaranteed
to bend the will of fairest womankind.

Scheme, would you, for a worldly gain?
Lust after a frigid virgin?
My herbs can grant your secret cravings
and my price is modest!

MONTRESOR No! No!

HERBALIST And my price is modest...

MONTRESOR No, thank you! No!

HERBALIST Oh it's very modest...

MONTRESOR No, no thank you!

No!

No thank you,

No!

HERBALIST Perhaps a poultice of Toadbane
for weakness of the manly parts,
caused by too much wine or age,
perhaps by over-frequent natural indulgence...
Applied with skill, it will
revive the fleshy passions of a corpse...

...of a corpse

MONTRESOR I said no

I meant no!

HERBALIST Well then, Good-day...

MONTRESOR So that is Usher's idea of a doctor!

That wretched mountebank can't help them.

I confront madness face to face!

And whatever it's cause, it lies within this place

I breathe an atmosphere of sorrow;

an alien despair makes my courage fail,

like the collapse of an opium vision,

the hideous dropping of the veil

CHORUS Tormented by a thousand doubts and fancies,

he will not sleep tonight.

Chilled by the gloom of his surroundings,

mortal, half-dead mortar.

MONTRESOR CHORUS

He will not sleep!

I see simple solutions

He will not sleep!

State them laud and clear,

but the echoes of the House He will not sleep!

shout 'Unreason!'

The one thing that I fear.

The evil that is done

cannot be undone.

The evil that will come

cannot be prevented.

The evil that is done

Yet somehow I must help

these two tormented souls,

cannot be undone.

for if I cannot, who will?
The evil that will come
These are the friends
I've loved so dearly...
cannot be prevented
Leave!
No! What a monstrous thought!
Depart!
How could I even think of it!
Go!
Abandon those who have need of me!
Leave!
Oh, but what a temptation,
Depart!
to run like a thief in the night,
Go!
And yet now I cannot
because it is too late Before it is too late,
I feel myself bound up in before you are bound up in
the web of fear and pain, the web of fear and pain,
the evil that surrounds me. the evil that surrounds you.
It cannot be undone.
It cannot be undone.
The evil that will come
cannot be prevented.
End of Act Three

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