

BERENICE



a short story by
Edgar Allan Poe

Egaeus is my name. My family - I will not name it - is one of the oldest in the land. We have lived here, inside the walls of this great house, for many hundreds of years. I sometimes walk through its silent rooms. Each one is richly decorated, by the hands of only the finest workmen. But my favourite has always been the library. It is here, among books, that I have always spent most of my time.

My mother died in the library; I was born here. Yes, the world heard my first cries here; and these walls, the books that stand along them are among the first things I can remember in my life.

I was born here in this room, but my life did not begin here. I know I lived another life before the one I am living now. I can remember another time, like a dream without shape or body: a world of eyes, sweet sad sounds and silent shadows. I woke up from that long night, my eyes opened, and I saw the light of day again - here in this room full of thoughts and dreams.

As a child, I spent my days reading in this library, and my young days dreaming here. The years passed, I grew up without noticing it, and soon I found that I was no longer young. I was already in the middle of my life, and I was still living here in the house of my fathers.

I almost never left the house, and I left the library less and less. And so, slowly, the real world - life in the world outside these walls - began to seem like a dream to me. The wild ideas, the dreams inside my head were my real world. They were my whole life.

Berenice and I were cousins. She and I grew up together here in this house. But we grew so differently. I was the weak one, so often sick, always lost in my dark and heavy thoughts. She was the strong, healthy one, always so full of life, always shining like a bright new sun. She ran over the hills under the great blue sky while I studied in the library. I lived inside the walls of my mind, fighting with the most difficult and painful ideas. She walked quickly and happily through life, never thinking of the shadows around her. I watched our young years flying away on the silent wings of time. Berenice never thought of tomorrow. She lived only for the day.

Berenice - I call out her name - Berenice! And a thousand sweet voices answer me from the past. I can see her clearly now, as she was in her early days of beauty and light. I see her... and then suddenly all is darkness, mystery and fear.

Her bright young days ended when an illness - a terrible illness - came down on her like a sudden storm. I watched the dark cloud pass over her. I saw it change her body and mind completely. The cloud came and went, leaving someone I did not know. Who was this sad person I saw now? Where

was my Berenice, the Berenice I once knew?

This first illness caused several other illnesses to follow. One of these was a very unusual type of epilepsy. This epilepsy always came suddenly, without warning. Suddenly, her mind stopped working. She fell to the ground, red in the face, shaking all over, making strange sounds, her eyes not seeing any more. The epilepsy often ended with her going into a kind of very deep sleep. Sometimes, this sleep was so deep that it was difficult to tell if she was dead or not. Often she woke up from the sleep as suddenly as the epilepsy began. She would just get up again as if nothing was wrong.

It was during this time that my illness began to get worse. I felt it growing stronger day by day. I knew I could do nothing to stop it. And soon, like Berenice, my illness changed my life completely.

It was not my body that was sick; it was my mind. It was an illness of the mind. I can only describe it as a type of monomania. I often lost myself for hours, deep in thought about something - something so unimportant that it seemed funny afterwards. But I am afraid it may be impossible to describe how fully I could lose myself in the useless study of even the simplest or most ordinary object.

I could sit for hours looking at one letter of a word on a page. I could stay, for most of a summer's day, watching a shadow on the floor. I could sit without taking my eyes off a wood fire in winter, until it burnt away to nothing. I could sit for a whole night dreaming about the sweet smell of a flower. I often repeated a single word again and again for hours until the sound of it had no more meaning for me. When I did these things, I always lost all idea of myself, all idea of time, of movement, even of being alive.

There must be no mistake. You must understand that this monomania was not a kind of dreaming. Dreaming is completely different. The dreamer -I am talking about the dreamer who is awake, not asleep - needs and uses the mind to build his dream. Also, the dreamer nearly always forgets the thought or idea or object that began his dream. But with me, the object that began the journey into deepest thought always stayed in my mind. The object was always there at the centre of my thinking. It was the centre of everything. It was both the subject and the object of my thoughts. My thoughts always, always came back to that object in a never-ending circle. The object was no longer real, but still I could not pull myself away from it!

I never loved Berenice, even during the brightest days of her beauty. This is because I have never had feelings of the heart. My loves have always been in the world of the mind.

In the grey light of early morning, among the dancing shadows of the

forest, in the silence of my library at night, Berenice moved quickly and lightly before my eyes. I never saw my Berenice as a living Berenice. For me, Berenice was a Berenice in a dream. She was not a person of this world - no, I never thought of her as someone real. Berenice was the idea of Berenice. She was something to think about, not someone to love.

And so why did I feel differently after her illness? Why, when she was so terribly and sadly changed, did I shake and go white when she came near me?

Because I saw the terrible waste of that sweet and loving person. Because now there was nothing left of the Berenice I once knew!

It is true I never loved her. But I knew she always loved me - deeply. And so, one day - because I felt so sorry for her - I had a stupid and evil idea. I asked her to marry me.

Our wedding day was growing closer, and one warm afternoon I was sitting in the library. The clouds were low and dark, the air was heavy, everything was quiet. Suddenly, lifting my eyes from my book, I saw Berenice standing in front of me.

She was like a stranger to me, only a weak shadow of the woman I remembered. I could not even remember how she was before. God, she was so thin! I could see her arms and legs through the grey clothes that hung round her wasted body.

She said nothing. And I could not speak. I do not know why, but suddenly I felt a terrible fear pressing down like a great stone on my heart. I sat there in my chair, too afraid to move.

Her long hair fell around her face. She was as white as snow. She looked strangely calm and happy. But there was no life at all in her eyes. They did not even seem to see me. I watched as her thin, bloodless lips slowly opened. They made a strange smile that I could not understand. And it was then that I saw the teeth.

Oh, why did she have to smile at me! Why did I have to see those teeth?

I heard a door closing and I looked up. Berenice was not there any more. The room was empty. But her teeth did not leave the room of my mind! I now saw them more clearly than when she was standing in front of me. Every smallest part of each tooth was burnt into my mind. The teeth! There they were in front of my eyes - here, there, everywhere I looked. And they were so white, with her bloodless lips always moving round them!

I tried to fight this sudden, terrible monomania, but it was useless. All I could think about, all I could see in my mind's eye was the teeth. They were

now the centre of my life. I held them up in my mind's eye, looked at them in every light, turned them every way. I studied their shapes, their differences; and the more I thought about them, the more I began to want them. Yes, I wanted them! I had to have the teeth! Only the teeth could bring me happiness, could stop me from going mad.

Evening came; then darkness turned into another day; soon a second night was falling, and I sat there alone, never moving. I was still lost in thought, in that one same thought: the teeth. I saw them everywhere I looked - in the evening shadows, in the darkness in front of my eyes.

Then a terrible cry of horror woke me from my dreams. I heard voices, and more cries of sadness and pain. I got up and opened the door of the library. A servant girl was standing outside, crying.

'Your cousin, sir' she began. 'It was her epilepsy, sir. She died this morning.'

This morning? I looked out of the window. Night was falling...

'We are ready to bury her now,' said the girl.

I found myself waking up alone in the library again. I thought that I could remember unpleasant and excited dreams, but I did not know what they were. It was midnight.

'They buried Berenice soon after dark,' I told myself again and again. But I could only half-remember the hours since then - hours full of a terrible unknown horror.

I knew something happened during the night, but I could not remember what it was: those hours of the night were like a page of strange writing that I could not understand.

Next, I heard the high cutting scream of a woman. I remember thinking: 'What did I do? I asked myself this question out loud. And the walls of the library answered me in a soft voice like mine: What did you do?'

There was a lamp on the table near me, with a small box next to it. I knew this box well - it belonged to our family's doctor. But why was it there, now, on the table? And why was I shaking like a leaf as I looked at it? Why was my hair standing on my head?

There was a knock on the door. A servant came in. He was wild with fear and spoke to me quickly, in a low, shaking voice. I could not understand all of what he was saying.

'Some of us heard a wild cry during the night, sir' he said. 'We went to find out what it was, and we found Berenice's body lying in the open, sir!' he cried. 'Someone took her out of the hole where we buried her! Her body was

cut and bleeding! But worse than that, she... she was not dead, sir! She was still alive!

He pointed at my clothes. There was blood all over them. I said nothing.

He took my hand. I saw cuts and dried blood on it. I cried out, jumped to the table and tried to open the box. I tried and tried but I could not! It fell to the floor and broke. Dentist's tools fell out of it, and with them - so small and so white! - thirty-two teeth fell here, there, everywhere...