

The Masque of the Red Death by Edgar Allan Poe - 1842

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal -- the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour.

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."

It was toward the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell you of the rooms in which it

was held. These were seven -- an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either side, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different; as might have been expected from the duke's love of the bizarre. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue -- and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange -- the fifth with white -- the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the

color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet -- a deep blood color. Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire that protected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. But in the western or black chamber the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a



look upon the countenances of those who
110 entered, that there were few of the company
bold enough to set foot within its precincts at
all.

It was in this apartment, also, that there stood
115 against the western wall, a gigantic clock of
ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a
dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the
minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and
120 the hour was to be stricken, there came from
the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which
was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly
musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis
that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of
125 the orchestra were constrained to pause,
momentarily, in their performance, to hearken
to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce
ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief
disconcert of the whole gay company; and,
130 while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was
observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the
more aged and sedate passed their hands over
their brows as if in confused reverie or
meditation. But when the echoes had fully
135 ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the
assembly; the musicians looked at each other
and smiled as if at their own nervousness and
folly, and made whispering vows, each to the
other, that the next chiming of the clock should
140 produce in them no similar emotion; and then,
after the lapse of sixty minutes, (which
embrace three thousand and six hundred
seconds of the Time that flies,) there came yet
another chiming of the clock, and then were
145 the same disconcert and tremulousness and
meditation as before.

But, in spite of these things, it was a gay and
magnificent revel. The tastes of the duke were
peculiar. He had a fine eye for colors and
150 effects. He disregarded the decora of mere
fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his
conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There
are some who would have thought him mad.
His followers felt that he was not. It was
155 necessary to hear and see and touch him to be
sure that he was not.

He had directed, in great part, the moveable
embellishments of the seven chambers, upon
160 occasion of this great fete; and it was his own
guiding taste which had given character to the
masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque.
There were much glare and glitter and piquancy
and phantasm -- much of what has been since
165 seen in "Hernani." There were arabesque
figures with unsuited limbs and appointments.

There were delirious fancies such as the
madman fashions. There was much of the
beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the
170 bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a
little of that which might have excited disgust.
To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked,
in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these -- the
dreams -- writhed in and about, taking hue
175 from the rooms, and causing the wild music of
the orchestra to seem as the echo of their
steps. And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock
which stands in the hall of the velvet. And then,
for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save
180 the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-
frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the
chime die away -- they have endured but an
instant -- and a light, half-subdued laughter
floats after them as they depart. And now again
185 the music swells, and the dreams live, and
writhe to and fro more merrily than ever,
taking hue from the many-tinted windows
through which stream the rays from the
tripods. But to the chamber which lies most
190 westwardly of the seven, there are now none of
the maskers who venture; for the night is
waning away; and there flows a ruddier light
through the blood-colored panes; and the
blackness of the sable drapery appals; and to
195 him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet,
there comes from the near clock of ebony a
muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than any
which reaches their ears who indulge in the
more remote gaieties of the other apartments.

200 But these other apartments were densely
crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart
of life. And the revel went whirlingly on, until at
length there commenced the sounding of
205 midnight upon the clock. And then the music
ceased, as I have told; and the evolutions of
the waltzers were quieted; and there was an
uneasy cessation of all things as before. But
now there were twelve strokes to be sounded
210 by the bell of the clock; and thus it happened,
perhaps, that more of thought crept, with more
of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful
among those who revelled. And thus, too, it
happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes
215 of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence,
there were many individuals in the crowd who
had found leisure to become aware of the
presence of a masked figure which had
arrested the attention of no single individual
220 before. And the rumor of this new presence
having spread itself whisperingly around, there
arose at length from the whole company a
buzz, or murmur, expressive of disapprobation

and surprise -- then, finally, of terror, of horror,
225 and of disgust.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I have
painted, it may well be supposed that no
ordinary appearance could have excited such
230 sensation. In truth the masquerade license of
the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure
in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone
beyond the bounds of even the prince's
indefinite decorum. There are chords in the
235 hearts of the most reckless which cannot be
touched without emotion. Even with the utterly
lost, to whom life and death are equally jests,
there are matters of which no jest can be
made. The whole company, indeed, seemed
240 now deeply to feel that in the costume and
bearing of the stranger neither wit nor
propriety existed. The figure was tall and
gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the
habiliments of the grave. The mask which
245 concealed the visage was made so nearly to
resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse
that the closest scrutiny must have had
difficulty in detecting the cheat. And yet all this
might have been endured, if not approved, by
250 the mad revellers around. But the mummer had
gone so far as to assume the type of the Red
Death. His vesture was dabbled in blood -- and
his broad brow, with all the features of the
face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

255 When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon this
spectral image (which with a slow and solemn
movement, as if more fully to sustain its role,
stalked to and fro among the waltzers) he was
260 seen to be convulsed, in the first moment with
a strong shudder either of terror or distaste;
but, in the next, his brow reddened with rage.

"Who dares?" he demanded hoarsely of the
265 courtiers who stood near him -- "who dares
insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize
him and unmask him -- that we may know
whom we have to hang at sunrise, from the
battlements!"

270 It was in the eastern or blue chamber in which
stood the Prince Prospero as he uttered these
words. They rang throughout the seven rooms
loudly and clearly -- for the prince was a bold
and robust man, and the music had become
275 hushed at the waving of his hand.

It was in the blue room where stood the prince,
with a group of pale courtiers by his side. At
280 first, as he spoke, there was a slight rushing
movement of this group in the direction of the

intruder, who at the moment was also near at
hand, and now, with deliberate and stately
step, made closer approach to the speaker. But
285 from a certain nameless awe with which the
mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired
the whole party, there were found none who
put forth hand to seize him; so that,
unimpeded, he passed within a yard of the
290 prince's person; and, while the vast assembly,
as if with one impulse, shrank from the centres
of the rooms to the walls, he made his way
uninterruptedly, but with the same solemn and
measured step which had distinguished him
295 from the first, through the blue chamber to the
purple -- through the purple to the green --
through the green to the orange -- through this
again to the white -- and even thence to the
violet, ere a decided movement had been made
300 to arrest him. It was then, however, that the
Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the
shame of his own momentary cowardice,
rushed hurriedly through the six chambers,
while none followed him on account of a deadly
305 terror that had seized upon all. He bore aloft a
drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid
impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the
retreating figure, when the latter, having
attained the extremity of the velvet apartment,
310 turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer.
There was a sharp cry -- and the dagger
dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon
which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in
death the Prince Prospero. Then, summoning
315 the wild courage of despair, a throng of the
revellers at once threw themselves into the
black apartment, and, seizing the mummer,
whose tall figure stood erect and motionless
within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped
320 in unutterable horror at finding the grave-
cerements and corpse-like mask which they
handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted
by any tangible form.

325 And now was acknowledged the presence of the
Red Death. He had come like a thief in the
night. And one by one dropped the revellers in
the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died
each in the despairing posture of his fall. And
330 the life of the ebony clock went out with that
of the last of the gay. And the flames of the
tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and
the Red Death held illimitable dominion over
all.