

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH



BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

THE "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No **pestilence**¹ 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**² bleeding at the pores, with **dissolution**³. 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**⁴ and **sagacious**⁵. 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**⁶, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of **ingress or egress**⁷ 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."

¹ Pestilence - n. sickness or disease

² Profuse - adj. plentiful or abundant

³ Dissolution - n. decay or disintegration

⁴ Dauntless - adj. fearless or bold

⁵ Sagacious - adj. wise

⁶ Courtier - n. a member of the court

⁷ Ingress/egress - n. entrance/exit

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**⁸ scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. There 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 hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely **impeded**⁹. 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**¹⁰ 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**¹¹ 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**¹², and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the **casements**¹³. 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.

⁸ Voluptuous - adj. luxurious

⁹ Impede - v. to obstruct or block

¹⁰ Disposed - v. arranged

¹¹ Hue - n. color

¹² Tapestry - n. piece of heavy, decorated fabric...hung from walls as decoration

¹³ Casement - n. window

But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a **brazier**¹⁴ of fire that protected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of **gaudy**¹⁵ 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**¹⁶ of those who 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 against the western wall, a gigantic clock of **ebony**¹⁷. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and 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 the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to **hearken**¹⁸ to the sound; and thus the **waltzers**¹⁹ perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief **disconcert**²⁰ of the whole gay company; and, 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 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 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 the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before.

¹⁴ Brazier - n. a stand with a pan for holding coals (used for heat/light)

¹⁵ Gaudy - adj. extravagantly bright or showy (to the point of being tasteless)

¹⁶ Countenance - n. face

¹⁷ Ebony - adj. black

¹⁸ Hearken - v. to listen

¹⁹ Waltzers - n. dancers (doing the waltz: a ¾ time dance)

²⁰ Disconcert - n. state of being disturbed or unsettled

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 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 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 occasion of this great **fete**²¹; 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**²² and **phantasm**²³ - much of what has been since 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 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**²⁴ in and about, taking hue 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 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 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 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**²⁵ drapery appalls; and to him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes

²¹ Fete - n. party

²² Piquancy - n. quality of being stimulating or exciting

²³ Phantasm - n. an illusion or apparition

²⁴ Writhe - v. to twist or squirm

²⁵ Sable - adj. dark colored

from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly **emphatic**²⁶ than any which reaches their ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments.

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the **revel**²⁷ went whirlingly on, until at length there commenced the sounding of 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**²⁸ of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded 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 reveled. And thus, too, it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes 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 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**²⁹ and surprise ~ then, finally, of terror, of horror, 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 sensation. In truth the masquerade license of the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had out-Heroded **Herod**³⁰, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally **jests**³¹, there are matters of which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit

nor propriety existed. The figure was tall and **gaunt**³², and shrouded from head to foot in the **habiliments**³³ of the grave. The mask which concealed the **visage**³⁴ was made so nearly to resemble the **countenance**³⁵ 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 the mad revelers around. But the **mummer**³⁶ had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His **vesture**³⁷ was dabbled in blood ~ and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

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 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 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!"

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 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 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 from a certain nameless awe with

²⁶ Emphatic - adj. forceful

²⁷ Revel - n. party or festive event

²⁸ Cessation - n. a stopping or halt

²⁹ Disapprobation - n. disfavor or disapproval

³⁰ Herod - Roman king known for madness, violence, & insatiable ambition

³¹ Jest - n. joke

³² Gaunt - adj. thin or skinny

³³ Habiliments - n. clothing

³⁴ Visage - n. face

³⁵ Countenance - n. facial expression

³⁶ Mummer - n. a masked actor or pantomime

³⁷ Vesture - n. clothing/dress

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**³⁸, he passed within a yard of the 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 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 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 terror that had seized upon all. He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid **impetuosity**³⁹, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter, having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, 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**⁴⁰ in death the Prince Prospero. Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revelers 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 in unutterable horror at finding the grave-**cerements**⁴¹ and corpse-like mask which they handled with so violent a rudeness, **untenanted**⁴² by any **tangible**⁴³ form.

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 revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And 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.

³⁸ Unimpeded - adj. unhindered/unable to be stopped

³⁹ Impetuosity - n. rashness/impulsiveness/hotheadedness

⁴⁰ Prostrate - adj. flat or horizontal

⁴¹ Cerements - n. waxed cloth for wrapping a corpse

⁴² Untenanted - v. unoccupied/vacant/empty

⁴³ Tangible - adj. solid/concrete/physical

