

Adapted from
“The Masque of the Red Death”
by Edgar Allan Poe

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No disease had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then bleeding at the pores. Scarlet stains appeared on the body and especially upon the face of the victim. And the beginning and end of the disease took only half an hour.

But the Prince Prospero was happy. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand friends from among the knights and dames of his court. With them he retired to the deep seclusion of one of his abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric taste. A strong and lofty wall protected it. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and hammers and welded the bolts. By taking these precautions, they were sure they would avoid the disease. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. There were clowns, ballet-dancers, and musicians. There was Beauty, and there was wine. All these and security were inside. Outside was the "Red Death."

Near the end of the fifth or sixth month of their hiding, and while the disease raged furiously abroad, Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

First let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. There were seven. Their windows were of stained glass that matched the color of the room. For example, there was a blue room—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple, 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 that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But the panes here were scarlet—a deep blood color. Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp. But in the corridors there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy stand, bearing a flame that protected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. This created a multitude of and fantastic shapes. But in the black room, the effect of the fire-light was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the faces of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within it at all.

In this room there stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the hour was to be stricken, there came from the lungs of the clock a sound which was so peculiar a note that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were forced to pause their performance. Thus the waltzers stopped their dancing and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, the giddiest dancers grew pale, and the more aged and calm passed their hands over their brows as if confused. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter broke out. 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 no similar emotion. Then, after the lapse of sixty minutes, there came yet another chiming of the clock, with the same results as before.

But, in spite of these things, it was a marvelous party. The tastes of the duke were strange. He had a fine eye for colors and effects. His plans were bold and fiery. 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.

To and fro in the seven chambers the partiers moved, in and about, causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps. But to the chamber which lies most westwardly, none of the maskers venture. The night is waning away, and there flows a rosier light through the blood-colored panes—and the blackness of the drapery. To him whose foot falls upon the carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal.

The other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went wildly on, until there began the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music ceased. And the dancing of the waltzers quieted; and there was an uneasy ending of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock. And thus it happened that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had not been noticed 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 surprise—then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust.

The figure was tall and gaunt, and cloaked from head to foot in the clothing of the grave. The mask which concealed the face was made to resemble the face of a stiffened corpse. And yet all this might have been endured, if not approved, by the mad partiers. But the figure had gone so far as to dress like the Red Death. His robe was dabbled in blood—and his broad brow was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon this haunted image, he was seen to be shaken with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste. But then his brow reddened with rage.

"Who dares?" he demanded hoarsely—"who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise!"

These words 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.

At first, as he spoke, there was a slight rushing movement of the group in the direction of the intruder, who at the moment was also near at hand. But from a certain nameless awe, no one put forth hand to seize him. So he walked within a yard of the prince while the vast assembly shrank away. Uninterrupted, he made his way with the same solemn and measured step 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 to the violet. It was then that the Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the shame of his own cowardice, rushed 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 to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter turned suddenly and confronted the prince. There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the carpet, upon which, instantly afterwards, fell Prince Prospero in death. Then, a throng of the revelers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and, seizing the figure, gasped in unutterable horror at finding no human 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. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held unlimited dominion over all.

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