

The Masque of the Red Death



The Red Death had long been feeding on the country.

No sickness had ever been so deadly — so great a killer — or so fearful to see. Blood was its mark — the redness and the **horror** of blood.

There were sharp pains, and a sudden feeling that the mind was rushing in circles inside the head. Then there was bleeding through the skin, though it was not cut or broken — and then, death!

The bright red spots upon the body and especially upon the face of the sick man made other men turn away from him, afraid to try to help. And the sickness lasted, from beginning to the end, no more than half an hour.

But Prospero, the ruler of that land, was happy and strong and wise. When half the people of his land had died, he called to him a thousand healthy, happy friends, and with them went far away to live in one of his **palaces**.

This was a large and beautiful stone building he had planned himself. A strong, high wall circled it. This wall had gates of iron. The gentlemen, after they had entered, brought fire to heat the iron of the gate to make them close so firmly that nobody could open them. Here they could forget the sickness, the Red Death. They would leave the outside world to care for itself.

Prospero had supplied everything they needed for pleasure. There was music. There was dancing. There was beauty. There was food to eat and **wine** to drink.

All these were within the wall, and within the wall they would be safe. Outside the wall walked the Red Death.

It was near the end of their fifth month there that Prospero asked his friends to all to come together for a dancing party, a **masquerade**. Everyone was asked to come dressed in fine clothes and with his eyes, or perhaps his whole face, covered by a cloth **mask**.

It was a scene of great richness, that masquerade. There were seven rooms in which Prospero's friends danced. In many old palaces, the doors can be opened in such a way that rooms like these seven can be seen all at the same time. In this palace, it was different. Little more than one of them could be seen at one time. There was a turn every 20 or 30 yards.

To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, was a tall pointed window. The windows were of colored glass, of the same color that was used in each room. The first room had blue cloth hangings on the wall — and blue were its windows. The second room had wall hangings of that blue-red known as purple, and here the windows were purple. The third was green, and so was the glass of the windows. The fourth had hangings and windows of yellow — the fifth of white — the sixth of violet. But the seventh room had hangings on the walls made of a rich, soft cloth which was black, black as night. And the floor, too, was covered with the same heavy black cloth. In this room the color of the windows was not the same. It was red — a deep blood color.

All the rooms were lighted through the outside windows. The resulting light was strange indeed, as it colored the shapes of the dancers. But the light that fell on the black hangings through the blood-colored glass was the most fearful of them all. It produced so wild a look on the faces of those who entered that there were few of the dancers who dared to step within those dark walls.

In this room stood a great clock of black wood. Gently it marked the seconds as they passed; and when it was time to mark the hour the clock spoke with a loud, clear voice: a deep tone as beautiful as music, but so strange that the music and the dancing stopped and the dancers stood still to listen. And then, after another 60 minutes, after another 3,600 seconds of Time, of flying Time, the clock struck again, and the dancers stopped as before.

Nevertheless, it was a happy and beautiful masquerade. And you may be sure that the clothes the dancers chose to wear, their costumes, were strange and wonderful. The dancers looked like the forms we might see in troubled dreams.

And these — the dreams — danced softly through the rooms, taking the color of the rooms as they moved. It did not seem that their steps followed the music, but that the music rose from their steps. But into the seventh room the dancers do not go, for the red light coming through the windows, and the blackness of the wall hangings, make them afraid — and he who enters hears more deeply the striking of the great black clock.

But the other rooms are crowded, and in them beats hotly the heart of life. And the dance goes on until at last the clock begins to strike 12. Again the music stopped. Again the dancers stood without moving while the slow striking sound continued. Before the clock was quiet again, many in the crowd saw that in the first room, the blue room, there was a masquerader who had not been seen before. As they talked softly to each other about him, a feeling of surprise spread through all the dancers, then a feeling of fear and sickening horror.

In such a group as this, only a very strange masquerader could have caused such a feeling. Even among those who laugh at both life and death, some matters cannot be laughed at. Everyone seemed now deeply to feel that the stranger should not have been allowed to come among them dressed in such clothes.

He was tall and very thin, and covered from head to foot like a dead man prepared for the grave. The mask which covered his face — or was it really a mask? — the mask which covered his face was so much like the face of a dead man that the nearest eye could not see the difference. And yet all this might have been acceptable — but the masquerader whom no one knew had made himself look like the Red Death itself! His clothes were spotted with blood. And the mask over his face was covered with the terrible red spots...or perhaps it was indeed his face!

When Prospero looked upon this fearful form, he was first filled with terror — and then with anger. “Who dares?” he cried. “Take him! Seize him! Pull off his mask so that we may know who we must hang at sunrise!”

Prospero stood in the blue room when he spoke these words. They sounded through the 7 rooms, loud and clear. At first, as he spoke, some of the dancers started to rush toward the strange masquerader. But they stopped, afraid, and no one dared to put out a hand to touch him.

The stranger started to walk toward the second room. He passed within a few feet of Prospero, who stood still, surprised. And while the dancers moved back from the center of the room, the stranger moved quietly, without being stopped, with a

slow, measured step, through the blue room to the purple room — through the purple room to the green room — through the green to the yellow — through this to the white — and then to the violet room.

As the stranger was entering the seventh room, Prospero suddenly and angrily rushed through the six rooms. No one dared to follow him. He held a sharp knife high over his head, ready to strike the stranger. When he was within three or four feet, the strange masquerader, the stranger, turned and stood silent, looking firmly into Prospero's eyes.

There was a cry — and the knife dropped shining upon the black floor, upon which a minute later Prospero himself fell, dead. The dancers then rushed into the black room. The strongest of the men tried to hold the masquerader, whose tall form stood beside the black clock. But when they put their hands on him they found inside the grave-clothes no human form, no body — nothing!

Now they knew that it was the Red Death itself that had come in the night. One by one, the dancers fell, and each died as he fell. And the fires died. And the clock stopped. And darkness and **decay** and the Red Death ruled forever over all.