

The Masque of the Red Death

By Edgar Allan Poe - Published 1842

Reworked by the MAD class of 2020 for a film of the same name

CAST:

Narrators:

Prince Prospero: _____

Guard 1: _____

Guard 2: _____

Guest 1: _____

Guest 2: _____

Guest 3: _____

Guest 4: _____

Guest 5: _____

Guest 6: _____

Guest 7: _____

Guest 8: _____

Other guests:

NARRATOR 1

The Red Death had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. You knew it by the sight of blood.

There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding out of the pores. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim were enough to shut him out from the aid and sympathy of all others.

With a seizure, the victim would be dead in half an hour.

But Prince Prospero was happy and brave and generous. When half the people of his land had died, he summoned to his presence a thousand healthy 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 crenellated abbeys.

PRINCE PROSPERO

Welcome my friends! Did I not say that I would provide?

NARRATOR 2

This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste.

A strong and lofty wall guarded it. This wall had gates of iron and the courtiers, having entered, brought hammers and had welded them shut. The Guards used spears to drive back any who were not invited to enter the abbey.

GUARD 1

Back! Back dogs! Go back to the fields, to the manors!

GUARD 2

This is not for you!

NARRATOR 3

Voices sometimes yelled from the outside, and hands would hammer on the gates in fear, and desperation. They would come less and less as time went on.

They resolved to prevent anyone entering or leaving this place if overcome by sudden feelings of despair or frenzy. The abbey was well stocked with all the provisions.

With this the courtiers could defy the possibility of becoming sick- the external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve or to think. The prince had provided everything. There were

fools, there were actors, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, and there was wine. All of these and safety were inside.

Outside the walls was the "Red Death."

It was toward the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at an unusual, magnificent masked ball.

It was an extravagant scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell you about the rooms where it was held. There were seven- an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight corridor, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole expanse is clear.

Here it was very different; as might have been expected from the duke's love of the "bizarre." The apartments were so oddly arranged that the view was no more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at the right and left, and in the middle of each wall was a tall and narrow Gothic window that looked out over the suite.

NARRATOR 4

These windows were made of stained glass whose color matched the shade of the decorations of the chamber. The eastern walls were hung, for example, in blue -- and vividly blue were its windows.

The second chamber's ornaments and tapestries were coloured purple, and here the panes were purple. The third was all in green, and so were the hangings, while the fourth was furnished and lighted with orange -- the fifth with white -- and the sixth with violet.

The seventh apartment was closely covered 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.

In this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to match the decorations. The panes were scarlet -- a deep blood color.

None of any of the seven apartments had a lamp or chandelier, though many golden decorations hung from the roof. But in the corridor outside each of the suites, there stood, opposite each window, a heavy torch, that projected its rays through the tinted glass and brightly lit the room, producing a variety of wild shapes.

But in the seventh chamber the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes was ghastly-looking, and produced so wild a look upon the faces of those who entered, that there were few bold enough to set foot inside it, at all.

GUEST 1

Perhaps the Prince has taken this theme too far, my dear?

GUEST 2

Quiet! He has ears all around us, and his largess cannot last if he hears base criticism of our asylum.

NARRATOR 1

Within this room, there also stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. It's pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand circled the face, at the hour, there came from inside that clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical. The sound it made was so strange and loud that, at each end of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra paused, momentarily, in their performance, to listen to the sound; and the dancers stopped their dancing; the party was disturbed while the chimes of the clock rang.

The most happy and excited turned pale, and the oldest guests rubbed their hands over their eyes as if confused or lost in thought. Their words were without sense.

GUEST 3

Why are we here?

GUEST 4

How long have we been behind these walls?

GUEST 5

Whispering to a group of friends

The gate! We have sealed the gate and none can pass, for our safety, or our freedom.

NARRATOR 2

But the prince answered none of these questions, lost in his own thoughts with his own faint sense of guilt- which did not last.

For when the sound ended, there was light laughter amongst the guests; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and foolishness, and made promises in low whispers, to each other, that at the next chiming of the clock they would not react that way again; and then, after sixty minutes as Time flies there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then they would react like they did before.

MUSICIAN

To the other musicians, who laugh each time

Play on, friends! The Prince pays a handsome sum to us, and we live where so many have not.

NARRATOR 3

In spite of all these things, it was a happy and magnificent party.

The tastes of the duke were rather peculiar, though. He had a fine eye for color and effects. He ignored the "tastes" of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his ideas glowed with barbaric style. 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 he was not.

He had mostly chosen the decor of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great party; and it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masquerade costumes. Be sure they were grotesque, full of glare and glitter. There were arabesque figures with odd style and dress. There were dreamlike fancies such as the madman imagines.

There was much of the beautiful, much of the lewd, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have suggested disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers they all walked, like a multitude of dreams. And these dreams- writhed in and about, taking colour from the rooms, and the wild music of the orchestra sounded like an echo of their footsteps. Later, the ebony clock which stands in the hall of the velvet would suddenly chime, and for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock.

NARRATOR 4

The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. The echoes of the chime die away -- they have lasted only for an instant- and a light half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. The music would swell, and the dreams live, and dance wildly to and fro more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many-tinted windows through which stream the rays of the torches.

But to the chamber which lies farthest west none of the maskers will go, for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-colored panes, the blackness of the sable drapery appalls; and to him whose foot falls on 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.

But the other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went spinning on, until at length the clock struck midnight and then the music ceased; and the movement of the waltzers stopped; and there was an uneasy stopping of all things as before.

But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus it happened- maybe this time more thought entered the heads of those who revelled. And so, before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many in the crowd who had become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had caught no-one's attention before.

NARRATOR 1

Soon, as the rumor of this new figure became known to everyone, there rose a buzz, or murmur, of horror, and of disgust. In an assembly of spirits such as I have described before, it may be said that no ordinary appearance could have caused such a sensation.

In truth the limits of the masquerade were nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the boundaries of even the prince's strange style. There are depths 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, 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 humour nor limits existed.

NARRATOR 2

The figure was tall and thin, and covered head to foot in the costume of one who is dead. The mask which concealed the face was made to look like the face of a stiffened corpse that the closest inspection would have had difficulty to fake. Yet all this might have been endured, if not approved, by the mad revellers around. But the actor had gone so far as to assume the look of the Red Death. His coat was covered in blood, his face spotted with the scarlet horror.

When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell on this ghostly image (which, with a slow and solemn movement, walked to and fro among the waltzers) he was seen to be upset- in the first moment with a strong shudder of terror or distaste; but in the next, his face reddened with rage.

PRINCE PROSPERO

With rage

Who dares! Who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Take him and unmask him -- that we may know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!

NARRATOR 3

It was in the eastern or blue chamber in which stood 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 quiet at the waving of his hand.

It was in the blue room where the prince stood, 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 approached close to the prince. But due to a certain nameless awe with which the look of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there were none who would seize him and so, with no one to stop him, he passed within a yard of the prince's person, who shrank from the figure, holding up his hands, yelling.

PRINCE PROSPERO

No!

NARRATOR 4

Everyone else, as with one impulse, shrank from the center of the rooms to the walls. The figure made his way uninterrupted, but with the same solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the beginning, through the blue chamber to the purple -- to the purple to the green -- through the green

to the orange -- through this again to the white -- and even to the violet, before any effort was made to arrest him, though they were heard to make noise to do so.

GUESTS 6,7, 8

Someone must stop him

GUEST 9

The prince has ordered it, for honour's sake!

NARRATOR 1

They argued with each other, pushing and pulling in turn, unable to do the deed, but insisting that anyone else take up the need. They quieted as they all took the opportunity and threw it away.

It was then, however, that the Prince Prospero, maddened with rage and the shame yelled, "cowards!" at his followers, as he rushed quickly through the six chambers. No-one followed him due to the deadly terror that had seized them all, though their hands reached out as though to pull him back to safety, crying out in fear and worry for him.

NARRATOR 2

He carried overhead a drawn dagger, and had quickly approached, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, who, having reached the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer.

There was a sharp cry -- and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, immediately followed by his dead body.

NARRATOR 3

Summoning the wild courage of despair, the group of revellers threw themselves into the black apartment, and seizing the mummer whose tall figure stood erect and motionless, arms stretched high overhead as if in welcome and within the shadow of the ebony clock, they gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave clothes and corpse-like mask, now completely empty.

And so the Red Death came to them all.

NARRATOR 4

He had come like a thief in the night. One by one the revellers dropped in the blood-coloured light in the halls of their masquerade, and so died each of them, in despair as they fell down next to their lord and prince.

And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the revellers, the flames of the tripods expired, and Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held endless hold over them all.