

(1) The “Red Death” had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar¹ 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 ban² which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellowmen. And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour.

(2) 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 lighthearted 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.

(3) It was a **voluptuous** 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**. 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 went 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 projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illuminated 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 entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its **precincts** at all.

(4) It was in this apartment, also, that 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 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 to the sound, and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions, and there was a brief disconcert 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. 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.

¹Avatar: in Hindu theology, the physical manifestation of a god.

²pest ban: sign indicating contamination by the plague.

- (5) He had directed, in great part, the moveable **embellishments** of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great *fête*. 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 seen in *Hernani*.³ There were **arabesque** figures with **unsuited** limbs and **appointments**. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were 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 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 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** drapery **appalls**; and to 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.
- (6) 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 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 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 chimes 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 **disapprobation** and surprise—then, finally of terror, of horror, and of disgust.
- (7) 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 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**, 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, and shrouded from head to foot in the **habiliments** of the grave. The mask which 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 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.
- (8) When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon his **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 the **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.

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This is not the end of Poe's story! What ending do you now expect? [Do not research the ending]

³*Hernani*: a play by Victor Hugo, 1830. It's an allusion by Poe to the poetic tragedy in five acts by French author Victor Hugo, first performed and published in 1830. Because it renounced the unities of time and place, *Hernani* was in the vanguard of the new, more naturalistic Romantic drama. The story is set in 16th-century Spain and extols the Romantic hero in the form of a noble outlaw at war with society, dedicated to a passionate love and driven by inexorable fate.

⁴*out-Heroded Herod*: been more extreme than the biblical King Herod, who ordered the deaths of all male babies up to two years old in an effort to kill the infant Jesus. The expression is used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.