

The Masque of the Red Death

by

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Based on the short story by Edgar Allan Poe

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Cast of Characters

<u>Prospero:</u>	The king.
<u>Theodora:</u>	The queen.
<u>Jester:</u>	The king's fool.
<u>Miranda:</u>	A servant at the abbey.
<u>Guard:</u>	An abbey guard.
<u>Revelers:</u>	Attendants of the king's masquerade, including Intoxicated Reveler, Obnoxious Reveler, and Gossipy Reveler.
<u>The Red Death:</u>	A mysterious guest at the masquerade.

An imperial suite in a fortified abbey in a faraway kingdom. The imperial suite consists of the Main Room and the Red Room. Each corner of the Main Room is themed with a different color: blue, violet, green, and orange. The Red Room, removed from the others, is bathed in a red light and whatever furniture is in it is covered in black. A large, ebony clock hangs in the Red Room. A JESTER enters the Main Room and begins to juggle four balls, one blue, one violet, one green, and one orange. After a moment the room begins to fill with MASKED REVELERS, including INTOXICATED REVELER, OBNOXIOUS REVELER, and GOSSIPY REVELER, in gowns and festive costumes. Among them is PROSPERO, the prince of the land, and his wife THEODORA. The revelers, Prospero, and Theodora exclaim with delight as the jester performs. Once all revelers are present, the jester concludes and bows. All in attendance applaud.

PROSPERO

An enchanting diversion! I desire more.

JESTER

More balls, sire? I think four is enough, between the two of us.

PROSPERO

Rascal, tell us a story.

JESTER

I know only one story, sire: that of a fool and a king and a masquerade.

PROSPERO

Ends it happily?

JESTER

For the fool or the king?

PROSPERO

For the audience.

JESTER

An impossible thing to answer, sire.

PROSPERO

Why, fool?

JESTER

Why, as any fool knows, sire, once a story has ended there is no audience any longer.

The ebony clock strikes eleven; all fall silent. As the chimes ring through the hall, a grim mood seems to settle upon the revelers.

PROSPERO

I like not this cheerless scene. Why, let us dance! Let us sing! Why, within these walls we are safe and warm and fear nothing! Come, strike up the instruments! A toast to the comforts of life! Here, here!

Prospero raises his glass to a cheer of "Here, here!" from the revelers in reply. Music plays. All begin to mingle and talk and dance and laugh as the memory of the clock's chimes fade away. The jester crosses to a chest, inside which he deposits his juggling balls. The lady Theodora follows him, carrying a goblet of wine. The jester straightens and turns to find her standing very close to him. He smiles. It is a practiced smile, clearly disingenuous but well-disguised as genuine.

JESTER

My lady Theodora. You wear a mask well.

THEODORA

Not well enough, if you recognize me so easily.

JESTER

I recognize my lady by the goblet in her hand.

THEODORA

Is that all?

JESTER

And by the unyielding sway of my lady's posture.

THEODORA

I am a little drunk.

JESTER

No, you're not so little. One would not guess from the sight of you, my lady, that there is a plague on.

THEODORA

Oh, but there isn't!

The jester forces himself to swallow a fleeting expression of revulsion at this remark. He continues the conversation with deference but allows himself to become a little more liberal in his speech.

JESTER

Then perhaps my lady would be good enough to explain why we are all prisoners here? Why we bar the windows and place guards at the gate? Is it not because there is a plague raging outside?

THEODORA

Dear fool. The plague is only in our minds.

JESTER

And the prison?

THEODORA

Why, every man is a prisoner in his own mind.

JESTER

Ah. A well-constructed argument. I wonder which of us is the better fool.

THEODORA

You insult me when you should dance with me.

JESTER

(Gesturing to an INTOXICATED REVELER,
who stumbles drunkenly.)

There's another. His wit will be a better match for you.

THEODORA

Unpleasant imp.

Theodora turns, gaily takes hold of the intoxicated reveler's arm, and leads him into a dance. The jester wipes his brow. Miranda, a maid, enters with a pitcher of wine. The jester notices her and, when she comes close, he approaches her.

JESTER

A sweet serving girl named Miranda
Obeying the king's memoranda
Broke her poor spine
Whilst fetching some wine
To fuel the king's propaganda.

Miranda smiles weakly.

JESTER

Is that all I get? Do you know how difficult it is to think of words that rhyme with Miranda?

MIRANDA

It was very clever.

JESTER

What's the matter? You look as though you've seen a ghost.

MIRANDA

She may be a ghost, now.

JESTER

Eh? Who do you mean?

MIRANDA

Do you sometimes think we're doing something awful, locking ourselves away in here?

JESTER

Yes. Your hand is shaking. What happened to you?

Miranda seems about to speak when an OBNOXIOUS REVELER interrupts.

OBNOXIOUS REVELER

Jester, show us a magic trick!

Miranda turns away quickly. The jester begrudgingly allows himself to be led away. Miranda continues to pour wine. She wanders near to Prospero, who is having a conversation with a GOSSIPY REVELER.

GOSSIPY REVELER

Why, just last night I heard the kitchen roundsman say we had not two more weeks' worth of stores remaining in the pantry!

PROSPERO

Preposterous! We have ample food for two months if not six. I have seen the inventory myself! Livestock and all.

GOSSIPY REVELER

Yes, majesty, but what of feed for the livestock? Will we not need to buy more before the fortnight is out?

PROSPERO

I tell you that is out of the question, and not necessary besides!

Enter a abbey guard.

GOSSIPY REVELER

But surely, your highness, we will need to leave here sooner or later.

PROSPERO

Why do you say such things? You want for nothing here!

GUARD

(To Prospero.)

Pardon, my Lord.

PROSPERO

What is it?

The guard delivers news to Prospero in hushed tones. The revelers around Prospero go quiet to try and listen.

PROSPERO

(Interrupting the guard after a few moments.)

Hush! Enough! Tell me you didn't bring them inside!

The guard looks down at the floor. Prospero absent-mindedly holds out his glass for Miranda to fill.

ABBEY GUARD

My lord... we couldn't leave them outside the gate...

PROSPERO

Fool! It's death to let them within the walls!

Miranda tries to fill the prince's goblet but her hands shake and she splashes wine on his sleeve. Prospero, becoming aware of Miranda, turns to her angrily.

PROSPERO

Incompetent girl!

MIRANDA

My lord! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to!

GOSSIPY REVELER

Wench, that wine is in limited supply!

MIRANDA

I'm sorry! I couldn't help it! My hands, they... they...

Miranda begins to sob. She tries to hide it but in vain. Prospero sees her tears and his demeanor settles into one of curious surprise.

PROSPERO

(To the guard.)
Remove them at once!

ABBEY GUARD

Yes, my lord.

The guard bows his head and exits in a hurry as the revelers begin to murmur. Prospero addresses them quickly.

PROSPERO

Now, everyone, please stay calm! Everything is well.
(To Miranda.)

There, there... Now, it is only drink. What is the matter, girl?

MIRANDA

(Shaking uncontrollably.)
Nothing, my lord. I'm sorry to have spilled the wine.

PROSPERO

We have plenty of barrels of wine. No, I am sorry to have lost my temper. It is not becoming for a prince. There, now. All is well. Now tell me what is the matter. Has it anything to do with what the guard spoke of?

By now the entire room, including the jester, has gathered to observe.

MIRANDA

...Yes.

GOSSIPY REVELER

Tell us what you saw!

PROSPERO

(To the gossipy reveler.)
Be quiet.
(To Miranda.)
What did you see, girl? Come, it's alright. Speak for all of us to hear.*Miranda looks around uncertainly, afraid to speak in front of the entire gathering of people.*

JESTER

It's alright, Miranda. My lord wishes you to tell them.

Miranda gathers courage, wipes away her tears, and begins to speak.

MIRANDA

At the abbey gate I heard a woman arguing with the guards.

PROSPERO

A woman?

MIRANDA

A peasant woman. From outside. She was pleading with him to open the gate. She said her son was dying... of...

PROSPERO

The Red Death.

MIRANDA

The Red Death. Yes. She said it was.

More murmurs.

PROSPERO

(To all.)

Hush.

(To Miranda.)

And? Go on.

MIRANDA

She said she wanted clean water for him. That he needed food and clean water. That there was none in the village. She said her son would die, like an animal, in the dirt, if no one helped. And he was there, and all covered in blood from his pours and all, the way they are before... just before the Red Death...

PROSPERO

Yes.

MIRANDA

And the guard kept saying over and over again, "There is no admittance to the abbey. There is no admittance to the abbey." And that's all he'd say.

PROSPERO

And what did she do?

Miranda pauses for a moment, gathering herself.

MIRANDA

It was then... It was then that she pulls a knife from her belt...

Miranda begins to choke on her words.

JESTER

It's alright.

MIRANDA

She says, "Then a curse upon you all, you cowards in your... damned citadel." And she takes her knife and... she cuts open her own throat. And the guard, he watches her and all he says is, "I'm sorry." And he doesn't move, or say anything more, and she's dead, and her clothes are drenched in blood, and the dirt is, and her son is, and they opened the gate to take the bodies...

PROSPERO

Enough.

Prospero gently guides Miranda's shaking frame away from him. The jester takes her away to a corner of the Main Room. Prospero straightens and lifts his chin, preparing to address the entire room.

PROSPERO

And now you see. All of you see what the world outside these walls has been reduced to! Frantic; desperate; animalistic; apocalyptic. We are the last bastion of hope for this kingdom. It is the duty of we privileged few to live while the world outside dies. It is our solemn task to shield the last remnants of this great empire within the fortified walls of this abbey, waiting patiently for the time when we may spill forth with our wisdom and capacity to heal the land of its deep and bloody wounds! That is why these walls must remain locked and the ample provisions made to last without addition. It is not a choice we have made, but a solemn vow! To keep ourselves--and our wits--healthy and bright, so that we may rebuild our towns and return to our people when this plague... this Read Death... has finally come to rest. We, safe, and it, gone forever!

There are murmurs and nods of agreement. Then the ebony clock strikes twelve and the room falls silent. The sound of the clock's chimes seem to seal the prince's words to the very walls of the room.

PROSPERO

Now, shall we let our minds rot in fear and self-doubt? Or shall we strike up the music once again and resume--

Enter the guard.

GUARD

My lord!

PROSPERO

What is it, now?

GUARD

The boy, my lord. The son of the peasant woman. He cannot be found.

PROSPERO

What do you mean he cannot be found? I thought you said he had died! Speak!

GUARD

He is gone from the crypt where he was left, my lord.

PROSPERO

Well, find him, dead or alive! His body is infected! Mobilize the entire guard!

THEODORA

(Looking offstage.)

Oh, what an excellent jest!

All turn to look in the same direction as Theodora just in time to see a MASKED FIGURE enter the room. It is tall and gaunt, shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. Its mask resembles the countenance of a corpse, skull-like and ghastly. His mask garments are dabbled in red, made to look like blood, causing the figure to resemble the embodiment of the Red Death. All revelers near him gasp and step away, forming a bubble of space around the figure.

JESTER

Far from excellent.

(To the figure.)

Think you the Red Death is a joke, sir?

PROSPERO

Take off that costume at once; this is a blasphemous mockery of our troubles!

The figure continues to creep gracefully and silently into the room with an almost otherworldly step. Its gait and posture seem utterly inhuman.

PROSPERO

(To guard.)

Seize him and unmask him!

GUARD

I dare not!

PROSPERO

Coward!

(To the revelers.)

Somebody seize him!

None of the revelers follow their king's commands. Prospero himself seems to consider stepping forward to apprehend the figure but cannot bring himself to do so. The figure begins to stride ostentatiously about the room, walking a full circle through the four colored quadrants of the Main Room. Wherever he walks, people move out of the way, yet the entire crowd seems to trail behind him in awe, like a school of fish following a shark. Prospero is fuming. The jester and Miranda huddle together to watch from a corner.

PROSPERO

This will stop at once! Do you hear me? I will call the guards if necessary!

The figure does not stop.

PROSPERO

(To all.)

Will one of you seize him, for the love of heaven!

(To the figure.)

I will arrest you myself if necessary!

(Pause.)

So be it!

Now the figure has stepped into the Red Room. Prospero draws a dagger from his belt and lunges at the figure, which turns to face Prospero at the last second. Curtains fall over the doorway to the Red Room. The sound of Prospero screaming. Prospero stumbles back through the curtain, his face and hands smeared with blood. The revelers finally take action and split themselves between rushing to tend the prince and throwing aside the curtains to the Red Room. Those who throw the curtains aside encounter only a pile of clothes and a mask, once worn by the figure but now empty. They pick up the clothes and inspect them. Those tending the king attempt to wake him but in vain. The jester checks the prince's body for a pulse and finds none.

JESTER

Prince Prospero is dead.

THEODORA

No! No, he can't be! He simply cannot be!

MIRANDA

Was it the son?

OBNOXIOUS REVELER

No, the figure is vanished! Only its clothes remain!

GOSSIPY REVELER

Impossible...!

JESTER

And yet, it has happened.

The jester stands and shakes his head. Then he moves to Miranda and holds her in an embrace. Suddenly the jester pushes her away, a look of shock and horror on his face.

JESTER

Oh, God! Oh, God, no!

OBNOXIOUS REVELER

What?

JESTER

Don't you see? Oh, we are lost! It was the Red Death itself that took the prince! Prospero... the citadel... we are all infected! Oh, poor fools! We are no longer prisoners in this cursed abbey, but prisoners in our own bodies, condemned to die with our guilty, blackened souls, unforgiven!

The crowd stands in sickly horror, taking in the jester's words. Those holding the figure's clothes drop them in fear; those kneeling by the king reel away from him. The jester seems to be struck with a terrible revelation.

JESTER

It came... like a thief in the night! To punish we revelers in our halls of sin! And the last of us... the last of Acacia have fallen into darkness and decay, and the Red Death... that vile plague... holds dominion over all! And it was we... we, in our hideous state, who made it so!

THE END