



TALES OF THE DAMNED

A Collection of Classic
Horror Stories

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About This Book

We all have fears. Some are logical and shared by most of us: fear of death; fear of pain; fear of losing someone we love. Some fears are less logical, but they are just as real for those who feel them. These are phobias: irrational fears of something that cannot really harm us. And then there are the fears specific to us as individuals: the darkness of the empty house next door; madness and monsters; violence. These fears are as unique to us as our fingerprints, and we suffer them alone.

Terrors, fears and phobias have fed the imaginations of every horror writer who has put stylus to wax, pen to paper and fingers to keyboard for centuries – and they continue to fascinate us to this day. The work of eight of these masters of the macabre – some short stories, some novels – I have retold in this book. For you.

A good horror story elicits a fear response – dread, terror, repulsion – and leaves a lingering sense of unease in the reader's mind. Scary stories have appeared in folklore and mythology throughout history and can be traced back to some of the world's earliest civilisations, including the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. However, the modern horror genre as we know it today only began to take shape in the late 18th and 19th centuries with the rise of the Gothic novel. Some of the most influential horror stories belong to this style and time. These include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and the psychologically disturbing short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, published in the 1830s and 40s. Not only did these dark tales (which feature monsters, ghosts, murder and lots of blood and gore) prove incredibly popular at the time, they also set the template for the modern horror genre so many of us love today.

Over the years, horror has developed many sub-categories – some of which are explored in this book. Psychological horror exposes the darkness within: paranoia, distrust, self-destruction, self-doubt, mental health issues. Edgar Allan Poe was a master of this style and is best known for his disturbing short stories – including 'The Masque of Red Death'. Supernatural horror – represented here by M. R. James's 'Whistle And I'll Come to You' and W. W. Jacob's 'The Monkey's Paw' – deals with menaces from outside our understanding of science, such as vampires, zombies, ghosts, demons, monsters, werewolves and witches. Survival Horror pits protagonists against explainable perils: murderers, cannibals, wild animals, hostile environments, or post-apocalyptic dystopias. With its serial killer antagonist, 'Bluebeard' is a survival horror story.

My version of 'Red Riding Hood' is written as a crimson homage to slasher horror films like *Halloween* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Pagan horror delves into the past to draw inspiration from ancient superstitions, folklore and religions. Although it can involve the supernatural, this genre often focuses on people and their macabre beliefs – human sacrifice or witchcraft, for example. 'Vasilisa the Daughter' (the only tale in this book made up by me) is my take on classic Pagan Horror films such as *The Wicker Man*, *The Witch* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*.

But enough of the horror theory, now it's time for the horror experience. Go ahead. Turn the page... step into the darkness and face your deepest fears.

Matt Ralphs



The Masque of the Red Death

Open your eyes. I want you to see...

Night. A town square surrounded by half-timbered houses. In the centre, where the gallows once stood, a mountainous bonfire. Flames rip. Sparks crack like musket shots and whirl away. Thick smoke, underlit by hellish firelight, boils up and further blackens the sky.

Townfolk (those few who remain) with rags wrapped around their faces toil in pairs, dragging corpses from piles and hurling them into the inferno. They weep and curse as they work, because these corporeal remains were once their neighbours, friends and family.

What's causing this cull, you ask? Come – I will show you.

Here's a victim. A man once, now stiff as a doll and propped up in a doorway. First, he'd have felt stabbing pains in the soft parts of his body, then nausea, dizziness, a creeping, panic-inducing paralysis, and finally... nothing. Look upon his face. The blood, the scarlet bruises. And such wild eyes – even in death!

This is the Red Death, a disease that completes its work not in days, or hours, but in minutes.

You'd like to find refuge, I imagine? I know *just* the place! That castle yonder, with towers and ramparts rising high above all this mortal misery. The thousand nobles and knights sheltering within welded the doors shut months ago and not a soul has entered or left since.

But *I* know a way inside. There's always a gap – it's how the dark gets in.

It is Prince Prospero, the ruler of this now half-populated land, who lives there. A happy, carefree man he is. Shrewd too – safely closeted away behind thick stone walls and feasting every night from full larders, while outside his people die in droves. But why should he care about them? After all, they're not rich, or noble born.

Ah, here we are. I told you, didn't I? The gap. Now, let's slip inside, you and I, and see what the jolly prince is up to. These outer halls are dark and abandoned; nothing here except spiders and shadows. The prince and his guests must be deeper inside...

Wait! Is that music I hear? What a merry sound! Come, let's follow the notes... across this courtyard... through this gate... down this corridor... and finally into the Imperial Suite – the innermost and most secluded part of the castle.

The Imperial Suite, designed by the prince himself in his own bizarre style, is compiled of seven capacious rooms, all joined, one to the other, by six gaping doors, but in a way so winding as to quite confound those inside; the rooms flow dawn-east to dusk-west, lit by burning braziers positioned behind stained-glass windows, each in their own colour to match the decorations within; the easternmost room is blue, then comes purple, then green, followed by orange, white, violet... and finally, the westernmost: utterly black.

I will show you *that* room later.

For now, let's stroll east-to-west through these happy six rooms and mingle with the one thousand revellers we find here. My, my! Say what you like about the prince, but he knows how to throw a good party.

Oh, what a poorly chosen descriptor! How could anyone look upon this opulent gathering and think for a moment that 'party' is the appropriate term? A mere *party* would not have scarlet-clad ballet dancers pirouetting on poles high above the throng, or fountains spouting rivers of red wine, or musicians disguised as satyrs and singers as nymphs.

No indeed. This is a ball – a masquerade, no less – of special magnificence held in contempt by the prince against the misery and death held at bay beyond his walls. One thousand people behind one thousand masks, and every design unique! Hooting monkeys, laughing dogs, goggle-eyed fish, leering demons, weeping cherubs, cackling witches: a delirious phantasmagoria, in parts beautiful, terrible, unsettling – and here's that word again – bizarre.

Watch this *fêted* thousand whirl and dance around us, bathed in the light of each coloured room. Listen to them gossip and prate – their laughter must sound loud trapped behind their porcelain masks. Smell the fat of the roasting pig, the scent of spicy perfume, the tang of sweat. It's hard to spare a thought to the horrors underway outside the walls with all this noise and movement and distraction.

Ah. But now we've come to the last room. The Black Room. Where blood-red light seeps as if from a wound through the stained-glass window and onto walls hung with black velvet tapestries. And while the other six rooms beat full of life, this ghastly place stands empty; not one of the gathering is brave or yet drunk enough to set foot here. But I know you are stout-hearted enough to peer into the gloom and see what lurks against the far wall: an ebony clock with shiny black hands crawling inexorably around a matt black face. Below, a pendulum, from which every swing comes a dull and monotonous *clang*.



Well, we are bound to find out soon enough, for the night is waning towards its end. In the meantime, let's do what we came here to do and find the prince! Ah, there he is, holding court in jocular fashion and surrounded by his adoring acolytes who praise him loudly for his style, taste and wit, and silently for his unscalable walls, welded doors and laden larders.

Ah, Prince Prospero! All seems so good and fine for you, does it not?