

Last Dance at Dante's

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The Harrowing of Hell seems to be largely forgotten now, but in the Middle Ages and before, it fascinated writers and theologians. This was first published in *Tales of the Unanticipated* #11.

Begin.

A lily-horned Victrola plays the same scratched disk, a foxtrot. Velvet-masked dancers bow and turn in the circles of their partners' arms. Lightbulbs shrouded in faded red and pink paper cast dusty shadows across the rough wood floor. When the music ends, the dancers separate and bow to new, no less unknown, partners. The foxtrot plays again, and they dance and change again. And again.

The music rips into silence. A man without a mask holds the Victrola's arm above the spinning disk. His face is startling, full of things the dancers do not recognize. The dancers try to keep their step, but the movement falls apart and they huddle together, confused. The maskless man watches them patiently.

Someone walks from the shadows beyond the pink-and-red light. Unlike the dancers' plain velvet masks, his is ornamented, sewn with jewels that turn false colors under the paper-hung bulbs.

I am the Manager, he hisses at the maskless man. Why have you stopped the dance?

I.

A velvet-masked dancer in a worn dinner jacket bows to his partner and takes her into his arms. He recognizes her dusty green-velvet dress as one his wife favored. Did I know you once? he asks. Mute, his masked partner dances on. He sees the familiar daintiness of her wrists, the blood that always flecked her bitten nails. I think you were my wife, he sighs: how I loved you. An echo touches the air, her remembered perfume. Didn't I know you? he cries—I thought I did; I tried so hard. She circles in his arms, silent.

The foxtrot ends. He releases the woman in the green dress. He turns and bows to a new partner. Her dress is blood-colored satin gathered close to the wrists and throat. He thinks perhaps his wife once had a dress like that.

II.

A velvet-masked dancer sits before a mirror in the rose-colored lounge, her skirts full as petals around her. Her reflection in the mirror is a maskless woman, dark-haired with creamy skin and amber eyes.

The dancer raises her hand to her velvet-covered face; the mirror-woman does likewise, applying red paint from a tiny glass pot to her lips and cheeks. I am beautiful, the dancer thinks, as she stares into the face of another.

The dark-haired woman tucks the pot into a silver bag that hangs from her wrist and stands, smiling down at the petals of her skirt. On her side of the mirror, she turns and walks from the lounge.

A narrow woman with harsh bones and discolored skin seats herself before the mirror. The

velvet-masked woman stares at her. I am so ugly, she thinks with despair, reflecting another.

III.

A velvet-masked man in a cummerbund bows to a masked woman in a taffeta dress, and they dance. As they circle the woman asks: forgive me, but didn't you do something or other? Well yes, he answers: I developed a series of theories that helped explain—

Your suit is very elegant, the woman interrupts: just what a famous man would wear.

Thank you, but my theories were more important, the man says. He tightens his hand on the woman's waist, feeling the taffeta slide under his fingers. Let me tell you about them.

The woman twists away to touch the sleeves of a passing couple. Only think, she exclaims, this man was a celebrity! They stop dancing to cluster close. So distinguished, they murmur to one another.

No, listen, he says weakly. It is what I did that is important.

So handsome, the growing crowd says. So beautifully dressed.

Well, yes, he says finally: perhaps I am.

The music ends. The dancers clustered around him pivot, bow to their partners and separate. One remains, a woman in a sequined dress. He bows to her and she returns it without interest. They dance.

Continue.

The man with no mask holds the Victrola's arm above the whirling disk. He says to the jewel-masked Manager that the dance continues, of course, but the foxtrot need not play; the dancers may choose another tune.

The Manager laughs, small explosions of breath at a foxtrot tempo. Certainly, he says, and gestures with a long-nailed hand. Let one of the guests choose a better tune for this dance, if they wish.

There is a hush. Hesitant, a man in a gilt-brocade jacket steps forward. I am a little tired of the fox-trot, he says timidly—May we have a waltz?

There are screams of rage from the other dancers, who kick and rip at him. The maskless man pulls him free, but he is bleeding, black stains on brocade in the dusty red light, and he holds his arms tight across his belly. With scarred hands, the man with no mask touches the injured man, who straightens with a sigh of what might be release, and then vanishes.

The dancers scream again, this time in fear. They press back from the place the bleeding man had been. Those wearing gilt or brocade hurriedly change their garb. No one meets the maskless man's eyes.

The Manager laughs again, like a metronome: would anyone else care to select a tune agreeable to all?

No one moves.

IV.

A velvet-masked woman stands beside the Victrola, in a ruby-colored dress of velvet patterned with birds. A small group of masked men and women watch her, but no one asks her to dance as the foxtrot plays again. And again.

A young man in a crumpled tie cautiously approaches. They bow and then dance, their heads close, talking. She laughs at something he says; the sound is happy, out of time with the scratchy foxtrot.

When the dance ends, the couple bow and separate, and the woman is left alone again beside the Victrola. The young man steps toward her, but the cluster of watchers close on him, pulling him into the shadows. The woman's fingers rub nervously at her velvet dress as she watches this. After a time, the group returns to their watching, but the young man is not among them.

Much later, he walks slowly into the light. There is blood on his shirtfront and he moves carefully. Hands outstretched, she runs toward him, but she stops short and turns to the watchers. They watch hungrily. She drops her hands and returns to the Victrola. Head averted, he limps past her, and bows to a velvet-masked woman.

V.

A velvet-masked man in a jacket with black satin lapels bows to his partner, and they dance. Her dress was cut low in the back; her spine shows sharp in the pink and red light. They dance well together. Each recognizes something in the other's style, and they switch to a complex sequence of variations. The woman sighs: I remember when we danced like this every night. The man nods; and the crowds, the thousands applauding. Her skirt flares as they cut across the floor. The other dancers do not notice the couple's elegance.

The man in the satin-lapelled jacket raises his voice to the other dancers circling around. You recognize us, don't you? he asks. We were famous!

Famous, his partner says, and her voice is shrill: people wept to see us move.

The others circle, heedless. The partners shriek at the others: you adored us, you stood for hours for the chance that our shadows might fall on you. Their fingers make claws raised at the others.

The music ends. The couple bows. A man with a faded silk boutonniere bows to the woman in the low-backed dress. The man with the satin lapels bows to a velvet-masked woman. The new couples move without grace.

VI.

A velvet-masked woman in diamond-heeled shoes clutches the sleeve of a man in a shimmery jacket. Please, do you have it, she asks: I will die without it.

He rubs at his nails with a handkerchief.

She whispers: I will pay anything. Take this brooch, it was my mother's. He inspects his long hands, silent. Her diamond heels flash as she begs.

I will take your shoes, he says at last.

Twisting on her ankles, she pulls off the shoes, barefoot presses them into his hands. She raises cupped hands and sobs as he pours a pale powder into them.

The foxtrot resumes. The diamond-heeled shoes fall to the floor as the man bows to the woman. Powder sifts forgotten from her fingers. Her feet bleed from splinters as she dances.

VII.

A velvet-masked man missing one shirtstud bows to a woman whose iridescent gown hangs lank above her bony ankles. You lost your shirt stud, the woman says. Her voice rasps with anger.

The man spits on the floor. If you hadn't been such a lazy bitch, it would have never gotten lost.

Her elbows jut indignantly: Lazy? I worked my fingers off while you wasted your days with your low-bred friends and whores.

Their voices hiss as they circle the floor.

The music ends; they bow and turn away. Partners are chosen as the foxtrot begins. The man with the missing shirtstud bows again to the narrow woman in the iridescent dress, and they dance. You lost your shirt stud, she rasps at him.

End.

The Manager laughs: will anyone else try to find a tune? No one moves. The Manager shrugs his narrow shoulders and turns to the man with no mask. It is the foxtrot they want, he says, and his laugh ticks again. Perhaps you should allow them to hear it.

Slowly, the maskless man nods slowly: it is their decision.

A man in a worn dinner jacket breaks free of his partner and runs across the floor, colliding with the Manager. The man claws free and falls to his knees before the maskless man. He rips his own mask from his face. The dancers mock his round cheeks, his balding head, the tears squeezing from his tired eyes. Let me rest from the remembering, he weeps; can't there be silence?

The maskless man touches the bald man's face; he smiles, the knots beside his eyes relaxing. The man touches him again and the bald man vanishes. The dancers gasp and crush back farther from the Victrola.

A woman in a bird-ornamented dress fights through the crowd, pulling free of her mask to expose her face, fine-boned and pale. She hesitates before the Manager, and a young man with blood on his shirtfront limps to stand beside her. Their eyes proud and frightened, they meet the Manager's gaze; jewels gleam as he steps aside. Angry, the dancers throw things at the two—purses and cufflinks, a lacquer-red shoe. When the man with no mask touches the couple they embrace and vanish.

Another dancer breaks free, and another. The masked dancers fight them, but are afraid to approach the man beside the Victrola. The men and woman walk forward, bleeding, faces bare, silks and brocades ripped. Each meets the eyes of the jewel-masked Manager, and each time he turns aside and they pass. The maskless man touches them all; they vanish.

At last no others come forward. The man with no mask looks at each of the masked dancers, but no one moves. You have this right, he says softly. And then he is gone.

The Manager steps to the Victrola and drops the iron arm back on the whirling disk; we will resume. The velvet-masked people straighten their torn garments, sort and take up their thrown shoes and backs. They turn to their nearest counterparts, bow, and dance.