



Edgar Allan Poe

*Morella and Other
Horror Tales*



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METZENGERSTEIN

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“Pestis eram vivus, moriens tua
mors ero.”

Martin Luther

Horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages. Why then give a date to the story I have to tell? I will not. Besides I have other reasons for concealment. Let it suffice to say that, at the period of which I speak, there existed, in the interior of Hungary, a settled although hidden belief in the doctrines of the Metempsychosis. Of the doctrines themselves—that is, of their falsity, or probability—I say nothing. I assert, however, that much of our incredulity (as La Bruyere observes of all our unhappiness,) vient de ne pouvoir etre seuls.

But there are some points in the Hungarian superstition (the Roman term was religio,) which were fast verging to absurdity. They, the Hungarians, differed essentially from the Eastern authorities. For example—“The soul,” said the former, (I give the words of an acute, and intelligent Parisian,) “ne demeure, quun seul fois, dans un corps sensible—au reste—ce quon croit d’etre un cheval—un chien—un homme—n’est que le resemblance peu tangible de ces animaux.”

The families of Berlifitzing, and Metzengerstein had been at variance for centuries. Never, before, were two houses so illustrious mutually embittered by hostility so deadly. Indeed, at the era of this history, it was remarked

by an old crone of haggard, and sinister appearance, that fire and water might sooner mingle, than a Berlifitzing clasp the hand of a Metzengerstein. The origin of this enmity seems to be found in the words of an ancient prophecy. "A lofty name shall have a fearful fall, when, like the rider over his horse, the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing."

To be sure, the words themselves had little or no meaning—but more trivial causes have given rise (and that no long while ago,) to consequences equally eventful. Besides, the estates, which were contiguous, had long exercised a rival influence, in the affairs of a busy government. Moreover, near neighbours are seldom friends, and the inmates of the Castle Berlifitzing might look, from their lofty buttresses, into the very windows of the Chateau Metzengerstein; and least of all was the more than feudal magnificence thus discovered, calculated to allay the irritable feelings of the less ancient, and less wealthy Berlifitzings. What wonder then, that the words, however silly, of that prediction, should have succeeded in setting, and keeping at variance, two families, already predisposed to quarrel, by every instigation of hereditary jealousy? The words of the prophecy implied, if they implied any thing, a final triumph on the part of the already more powerful house, and were, of course, remembered, with the more bitter animosity, on the side of the weaker, and less influential.

Wilhelm, Count Berlifitzing, although honourably, and loftily descended, was, at the epoch of this narrative, an infirm, and doting old man, remarkable for nothing but an inordinate, and inveterate personal antipathy to the family of his rival, and so passionate a love of horses, and of

a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour.

I have just spoken of that morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid facility of his impromptus could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, as he gave it, because, in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. The verses, which were entitled "The Haunted Palace," ran very nearly, if not accurately, thus:

I

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once fair and stately palace—
Radiant palace—reared its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion—
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

II

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow;
(This—all this—was in the olden
Time long ago)
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odour went away.

III

Wanderers in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Spirits moving musically
To a lute's well-tuned law,
Round about a throne, where sitting
(Porphyrogene!)
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen.

IV

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.

V

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;

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