

EDGAR ALLAN & POE



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Welcome to your *nightmares*...

Metzengerstein

A Tale in Imitation of the German

Peccata erant vitæ—moriens tua mors ero.
—MARTIN LUTHER

HORROR AND FATALITY have been stalking aboard 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 Metempsychosis. Of the doctrines themselves—that is, of their falsity, or of their probability—I say nothing. I assert, however, that much of our incredulity—as La Bruyère says of all our unhappiness—“*vient de ne pouvoir être seuls.*”

But there were some points in the Hungarian superstition which were fast verging to absurdity. They—the Hungarians—differed very essentially from their Eastern authorities. For example. “*The soul,*” said the former—I give the words of an acute and intelligent Parisian—*ne demeure qu’un seul fois dans un corps sensible: au reste—un cheval, un chien, un homme même n’ est que la ressemblance peu tangible de ces animaux.*”

The families of Berlitzing 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 observed

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 neighbors are seldom friends—and the inhabitants of the Castle Berlifitzing might look, from their lofty buttresses, into the very windows of the Chateau Metzengerstein. 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 prophecy seemed to imply—if it implied any thing—a final triumph on the part of the already more powerful house; and was of course remembered with the more bitter animosity on the side of the weaker and less influential.

Wilhelm, Count Berlifitzing, although honorably 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 hunting, that neither bodily infirmity, great age, nor mental incapacity, prevented his daily participation in the dangers of the chase.

Frederick, Baron Metzengerstein, was, on the other hand, not yet of age. His father, the Minister G——, died young. His mother, the Lady Mary, followed quickly

after. Frederick was, at that time, in his fifteenth year. In a city fifteen years are no long period—a child may be still a child in his third lustrum: but in a wilderness—in so magnificent a wilderness as that old principality, fifteen years have a far deeper meaning.

The beautiful Lady Mary! How *could* she die?—and of consumption! But it is a path I have prayed to follow. I would wish all I love to perish of that gentle disease. How glorious! to depart in the hey-day of the young blood—the heart all passion—the imagination all fire—amid the remembrances of happier days—in the full of the year—and so be buried up forever in the gorgeous autumnal leaves!

Thus died the Lady Mary. The young Baron Frederick stood without a living relative by the coffin of his dead mother. He placed his hand upon her placid forehead. No shudder came over his delicate frame—no sigh from his flinty bosom. Heartless, self-willed, and impetuous from his childhood, he had reached the age of which I speak through a career of unfeeling, wanton, and reckless dissipation; and a barrier had long since arisen the channel of all holy thoughts and gentle recollections.

From some peculiar circumstances attending the administration of his father, the young Baron, at the decease of the former, entered immediately upon his vast possessions. Such estates were seldom held before by a nobleman of Hungary. His castles were without number—of these the chief in point of splendor and extent was the "Chateau Metzengerstein." The boundary line of his dominions was never clearly defined—but his principal park embraced a circuit of fifty miles.

Upon the succession of a proprietor so young—with a character so well known—to a fortune so unparalleled—little speculation was afloat in regard to his probable course of conduct. And, indeed, for the space of three days the behavior of the heir out-heroded Herod, and fairly surpassed the expectations of his most enthusiastic admirers. Shameful debaucheries—flagrant treacheries—

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\$3.99 (\$4.99 CAN)

ISBN 978-3-8125-0455-2



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Printed in the USA