

METZENGERSTEIN

A TALE IN IMITATION OF THE GERMAN



Pestis eram vivus—moriens tua mors ero [Living, I was your plague—dying, I shall be your death].—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 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* [comes from the inability to be alone]."

But there were 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 qu'un seule fois dans un corps sensible: au reste—ce qu'on croit d'être un cheval—un chien—un homme—n'est que la ressemblance peu tangible de ces animaux* [resides only once in a material body; as for the rest—what is thought to be a horse, dog, or man—is only the intangible essence of these animals]."

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 ap-

pearance, 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 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 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 decrepitude, 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 fall 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 laid his hand upon her placid forehead. No shudder came over his delicate frame—no sigh from his gentle bosom—no curl upon his kingly lip. Heartless, self-willed, and impetuous from his childhood, he had arrived at the age of which I speak, through a career of unfeeling, wanton, and reckless dissipation, and a barrier had long since arisen in 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, never before, held 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 one hundred and 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 behaviour of the heir out-heroded Herod, and fairly surpassed the expectations of his most enthusiastic admirers. Shameful debaucheries—flagrant treacheries—unheard-of atrocities—gave his trembling vassals quickly to understand that no servile submission on their part—no punctilios of conscience on his own—were thenceforward to prove any protection against the bloodthirsty and remorseless fangs of a petty Caligula. On the night of the fourth day, the stables of the Castle Berlitzing were discovered to be on fire; and the neighbourhood unanimously added the crime of the incendiary to the already frightful list of the Baron's misdemeanors and enormities.

But during the tumult occasioned by this occurrence, the young nobleman himself sat, apparently buried in meditation, in a vast and desolate upper apartment of his family palace of Metzengerstein. The rich although faded tapestry hangings which swung gloomily upon the walls, represented the majestic, and shadowy forms of a thousand illustrious ancestors. Here, rich-ermine priests, and pontifical dignitaries, familiarly seated with the autocrat and the sovereign, put a veto on the wishes of some temporal king, or restrained with the fiat of papal supremacy the rebellious sceptre of the Arch-enemy. Here, the dark, tall statures of the Princes Metzengerstein—their muscular war-coursers plunging over the carcass of a fallen foe—startled the firmest nerves with their vigorous expression: and here, the voluptuous and swan-like figures of the dames of days gone by, floated away in the mazes of an unreal dance to the strains of imaginary melody.

But as the Baron listened, or affected to listen, to the rapidly increasing uproar in the stables of the Castle Berlifitzing—or perhaps pondered, like Nero, upon some more decided act of audacity—his eyes were unwittingly rivetted to the figure of an enormous, and unnaturally colored horse, represented in the tapestry as belonging to a Saracen ancestor of the family of his rival. The horse itself, in the fore-ground of the design, stood motionless and statue-like—while, farther back, its discomfited rider perished by the dagger of a Metzengerstein.

There was a fiendish expression on the lip of the young Frederick, as he became aware of the direction which his glance had, thus, without consciousness, assumed. But he did not remove it. On the contrary, the longer he gazed, the more impossible did it appear that he might ever withdraw his vision from the fascination of that tapestry. It was with difficulty that he could reconcile his dreamy and incoherent feelings, with the certainty of being awake. He could, by no means, account for the singular, intense, and overwhelming anxiety which appeared falling, like a shroud, upon his senses. But the tumult without becoming suddenly more violent, with a kind of compulsory and desperate exertion he diverted his attention to the glare of ruddy light thrown full by the flaming stables upon the windows of his apartment.

The action was but momentary; his gaze returned mechanically to the wall. To his extreme horror and surprise, the head of the gigantic steed had, in the meantime, altered its position. The neck of the animal, before arched, as if in compassion, over the prostrate body of its lord, was now extended, at full length, in the direction of the Baron. The eyes, before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red; and the distended lips of the apparently enraged horse left in full view his sepulchral and disgusting teeth.

Stupified with terror, the young nobleman tottered to the door. As he threw it open, a flash of red light, streaming far into the chamber, flung his shadow with a clear, decided outline against the quivering tapestry; and he shuddered to perceive that shadow—as he staggered, for a moment, upon the threshold—assuming the exact position, and precisely filling up the contour, of the relentless and triumphant murderer of the Saracen Berlifitzing.

With the view of lightening the oppression of his spirits, the Baron hurried into the open air. At the principal gate of the Chateau he encountered three equerries. With much difficulty, and at the imminent peril of their lives, they were restraining the convulsive plunges of a gigantic and fiery-colored horse.

“Whose horse is that? Where did you get him?” demanded the

youth, in a querulous and husky tone of voice, as he became instantly aware that the mysterious steed in the tapestried chamber was the very counterpart of the furious animal before his eyes.

"He is your own property, sire," replied one of the equerries, "at least he is claimed by no other owner. We caught him flying, just now, all smoking and foaming with rage, from the burning stables of the Castle Berlifitzing. Supposing him to have belonged to the old Count's stud of foreign horses, we led him back as an estray. But the grooms there disclaim any title to the creature; which is singular, since he bears evident marks of a narrow escape from the flames."

"The letters W. V. B. are, moreover, branded very distinctly upon his forehead," interrupted a second equerry; "We, at first, supposed them, of course, to be the initials of William Von Berlifitzing—but all at the castle are positive in denying any knowledge of the horse."

"Extremely singular!" said the young Baron, with a musing air, apparently unconscious of the meaning of his words. "He is, as you say, a remarkable horse—a prodigious horse! although, as you very justly observe, of a suspicious and untractable character; let him be mine, however," added he, after a pause, "perhaps a rider like Frederick of Metzengerstein, may tame even the devil from the stables of Berlifitzing."

"You appear to be mistaken, my lord; the horse, as I think we mentioned, is *not* from the stables of the Count. If such were the case, we know our duty better than to bring him in the presence of a noble of your name."

"True!" observed the Baron, drily; and at that instant a page of the bed-chamber came from the Chateau with a heightened color, and precipitate step. He whispered into his master's ear an account of the miraculous, and sudden disappearance of a small portion of the tapestry, in an apartment which he designated; entering, at the same time, into particulars of a minute and circumstantial character; but from the low tone of voice in which these latter were communicated, nothing escaped to gratify the excited curiosity of the equerries.

The young Frederick, however, during the conference, seemed agitated by a variety of emotions. He soon, however, recovered his composure, and an expression of determined malignancy settled upon his countenance, as he gave peremptory orders that a certain chamber should be immediately locked up, and the key placed, forthwith, in his own possession.

"Have you heard of the unhappy death of the hunter Berlifitzing?" said one of his vassals to the Baron, as, after the affair of the page, the huge and mysterious steed which the nobleman had adopted as his own, plunged and curveted, with redoubled, and supernatural fury, down the long avenue which extended from the Chateau to the stables of Metzengerstein.

"No!" said the Baron, turning abruptly towards the speaker, "dead! say you?"

"It is true, my lord, and is no unwelcome intelligence, I imagine, to a noble of your family?"

A rapid smile, of a peculiar and unintelligible meaning, shot over the beautiful countenance of the listener. "How died he?"

"In his great exertions to rescue a favorite portion of his hunting stud, he has himself perished miserably in the flames."

"I—n—d—e—e—d—!" ejaculated the Baron, as if slowly and deliberately impressed with the truth of some exciting idea.

"Indeed;" repeated the vassal.

"Shocking!" said the youth, calmly, and returned into the Chateau.

From this date a marked alteration took place in the outward demeanor of the dissolute young Baron Frederick of Metzengerstein. Indeed, the behaviour of the heir disappointed every expectation, and proved little in accordance with the views of many a manœuvring mamma; while his habits and manners, still less than formerly, offered anything congenial with those of the neighboring aristocracy. He was seldom to be seen at all, never beyond the limits of his own domain. There are few, in this social world, who are utterly companionless, yet so seemed he; unless, indeed, that unnatural, impetuous, and fiery-colored horse, which he thenceforward continually bestrode, had any mysterious right to the title of his friend.

Numerous invitations on the part of the neighborhood for a long time, however, continually flocked in. "Will the Baron honor our festivals with his presence?" "Will the Baron attend our excursions?"—"Baron Frederick does not hunt;" "Baron Frederick will not attend," were the haughty and laconic answers.

These repeated insults were not to be endured by an imperious nobility. Such invitations became less cordial—less frequent—in time they ceased altogether. The widow of the unfortunate Count Berlitzing was even heard to express a hope "that the Baron might be at home when he did not choose to be at home, since he disdained the company of his equals; and ride when he did not wish to ride, since he preferred the society of a horse." This to be sure was a very silly explosion of hereditary pique; and merely proved how singularly unmeaning our sayings are apt to become, when we desire to be unusually energetic.

The charitable, nevertheless, attributed the alteration in the conduct of the young nobleman to the natural sorrow of a son for the untimely loss of his parents;—forgetting, however, his atrocious and reckless behaviour during the short period immediately succeeding that bereavement. Some there were, indeed, who suggested a too haughty idea of self-consequence and dignity. Others again

(among whom may be mentioned the family physician) did not hesitate in speaking of morbid melancholy, and hereditary ill-health; while dark hints, of a more equivocal nature, were current among the multitude.

Indeed, the Baron's perverse attachment to his lately-acquired charger—an attachment which seemed to attain new strength from every fresh example of the brute's ferocious and demon-like propensities—at length became, in the eyes of all reasonable men, a hideous and unnatural fervor. In the glare of noon—at the dead hour of night—in sickness or in health—in calm or in tempest, in moonlight or in shadow, the young Metzengerstein seemed riveted to the saddle of that colossal horse, whose intractable audacities so well accorded with the spirit of his own.

There were circumstances, moreover, which, coupled with late events, gave an unearthly and portentous character to the mania of the rider, and the capabilities of the steed. The space passed over in a single leap had been accurately measured, and was found to exceed by an incalculable distance, the wildest expectations of the most imaginative; while the red lightning, itself, was declared to have been outridden in many a long-continued, and impetuous career. The Baron, besides, had no particular name for the animal, although all the rest of his extensive collection were distinguished by characteristic appellations. Its stable was appointed at a distance from the others; and with regard to grooming and other necessary offices, none but the owner in person had ever ventured to officiate, or even to enter the enclosure of that particular stall. It was also to be observed, that although the three grooms, who had caught the horse as he fled from the conflagration at Berlifitzing, had succeeded in arresting his course, by means of a chain-bridle and noose—yet no one of the three could with any certainty affirm that he had, during that dangerous struggle, or at any period thereafter, actually placed his hand upon the body of the beast. Instances of peculiar intelligence in the demeanor of a noble and high-spirited steed are not to be supposed capable of exciting unreasonable attention,—especially among men who, daily trained to the labors of the chase, might appear well acquainted with the sagacity of a horse—but there were certain circumstances which intruded themselves per force upon the most skeptical and phlegmatic; and it is said there were times when this singular and mysterious animal caused the gaping crowd who stood around to recoil in silent horror from the deep and impressive meaning of his terrible stamp—times when the young Metzengerstein turned pale and shrunk away from the rapid and searching expression of his intense and human-looking eye.

Among all the retinue of the Baron, however, none were found to

doubt the ardor of that extraordinary affection which existed on the part of the young nobleman for the fiery qualities of his horse; at least, none but an insignificant and misshapen little page, whose deformities were in every body's way, and whose opinions were of the least possible importance. He (if his ideas are worth mentioning at all,) had the effrontery to assert that his master never vaulted into the saddle, without an unaccountable and almost imperceptible shudder; and that, upon his return from every habitual ride, during which his panting and bleeding brute was never known to pause in his impetuosity, although he, himself, evinced no appearance of exhaustion, yet an expression of triumphant malignity distorted every muscle in his countenance.

These ominous circumstances portended in the opinion of all people, some awful, and impending calamity. Accordingly one tempestuous night, the Baron descended, like a maniac, from his bed-chamber, and, mounting in great haste, bounded away into the mazes of the forest. An occurrence so common attracted no particular attention, but his return was looked for with intense anxiety on the part of his domestics, when, after some hours' absence, the stupendous and magnificent battlements of the Chateau Metzengerstein, were discovered crackling and rocking to their very foundation, under the influence of a dense and livid mass of ungovernable fire.

As the flames, when first seen, had already made so terrible a progress that all efforts to save any portion were evidently futile, the astonished neighborhood stood idly around in silent, and apathetic wonder. But a new and fearful object soon riveted the attention of the multitude, and proved the vast superiority of excitement which the sight of human agony exercises in the feelings of a crowd, above the most appalling spectacles of inanimate matter.

Up the long avenue of aged oaks which led from the forest to the main entrance of the Chateau Metzengerstein, a steed, bearing an unbonneted and disordered rider, was seen leaping with an impetuosity which outstripped the very Demon of the tempest, and called forth from every beholder an ejaculation of—"Azrael!"

The career of the horseman was indisputably, on his own part, uncontrollable. The agony of his countenance, the convulsive struggling of his frame, gave evidence of superhuman exertion: but no sound, save a solitary shriek, escaped from his lacerated lips, which were bitten through and through in the intensity of terror. One instant, and the clattering of hoofs resounded sharply and shrilly above the roaring of the flames and the shrieking of the winds—another, and, clearing at a single plunge the gate-way and the moat, the animal bounded, with its rider, far up the tottering staircase of

the palace, and was lost in the whirlwind of hissing, and chaotic fire.

The fury of the storm immediately died away, and a dead calm suddenly succeeded. A white flame still enveloped the building like a shroud, and, streaming far away into the quiet atmosphere, shot forth a glare of preternatural light; while a cloud of wreathing smoke settled heavily over the battlements, and slowly, but distinctly assumed the appearance of a motionless and colossal horse.

Frederick, Baron Metzengerstein, was the last of a long line of princes. His family name is no longer to be found among the Hungarian aristocracy.

[January 14, 1832]