

Morella

A Tale.

By Edgar A. Poe

Auto kath' auto meth' autou, mono eides aei on.

Itself—alone by itself—eternally one and single.

— Plato, Symposium.

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With a feeling of deep but most singular affection I regarded my friend Morella. Thrown by accident into her society many years ago, my soul, from our first meeting, burned with fires it had never known—but the fires were not of Eros—and bitter and tormenting to my eager spirit was the gradual conviction that I could in no manner define their unusual meaning, or regulate their vague intensity. Yet we met: and Fate bound us together at the altar: and I never spoke of love, or thought of passion. She, however, shunned society, and, attaching herself to me alone, rendered me happy. It is a happiness to wonder. It is a happiness to dream.

Morella's erudition was profound. As I hope to live, her talents were of no common order—her powers of mind were gigantic. I felt this, and in many matters became her pupil. I soon, however, found that Morella, perhaps on account of her Presburg education, placed before me a number of those mystical writings which are usually considered the mere dross of the early German literature. These, for what reasons I could not imagine, were her favorite and constant study: and that in process of time they became my own, should be attributed to the simple but effectual influence of habit and example.

In all this, if I err not, my reason had little to do. My convictions, or I forget myself, were in no manner acted upon by my imagination, nor was any tincture of the mysticism which I read, to be discovered, unless I am greatly mistaken, either in my deeds or in my thoughts. Feeling deeply persuaded of this I abandoned myself more implicitly to the guidance of my wife, and entered with a bolder spirit into the intricacy of her studies. And then—then, when poring over forbidden pages I felt the spirit kindle within me, would Morella place her cold hand upon my own, and rake up from the ashes of a dead philosophy some low singular words, whose strange meaning burnt themselves in upon my memory: and then hour after hour would I linger by

her side, and dwell upon the music of her thrilling voice, until at length its melody was tinged with terror and fell like a shadow upon my soul, and I grew pale, and shuddered inwardly at those too un-earthly tones—and thus suddenly faded into Horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnon became Ge-Henna.

It is unnecessary to state the exact character of these disquisitions, which, growing out of the volumes I have mentioned, formed, for so long a time, almost the sole conversation of Morella and myself. By the learned in what might be termed theological morality they will be readily conceived, and by the unlearned they would, at all events, be little understood. The wild Pantheism of Fitch—the modified Paliggenesia of the Pythagoreans—and, above all, the doctrines of Identity as urged by Schelling were generally the points of discussion presenting the most of beauty to the imaginative Morella. That Identity which is not improperly called Personal, I think Mr. Locke truly defines to consist in the sameness of a rational being. And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call ourselves—thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the Principium Individuationis—the notion of that Identity which at death is, or is not lost forever, was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest, not more from the mystical and exciting nature of its consequences, than from the marked and agitated manner in which Morella mentioned them.

But, indeed, the time had now arrived when the mystery of my wife's manner oppressed me like a spell. I could no longer bear the touch of her wan fingers, nor the low tone of her musical language, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes. And she knew all this but did not upbraid. She seemed conscious of my weakness, or my folly—and, smiling, called it Fate. She seemed also conscious of a cause, to me unknown, for the gradual alienation of my regard; but she gave me no hint or token of its nature. Yet was she woman, and pined away daily. In time the crimson spot settled steadily upon the cheek, and the blue veins upon the pale forehead became prominent: and one instant my nature melted into pity, but in the next I met the glance of her meaning eyes, and my soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and fathomless abyss.

Shall I then say that I long'd with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease? I did. But the fragile spirit clung to its tenement of clay for many days—for many weeks and irksome months—until my tortured

nerves obtained the mastery over my mind, and I grew furious with delay, and with the heart of a fiend I cursed the days, and the hours, and the bitter moments which seemed to lengthen, and lengthen as her gentle life declined—like shadows in the dying of the day.

But one autumnal evening, when the winds lay still in Heaven, Morella called me to her side. There was a dim mist over all the earth, and a warm glow upon the waters, and amid the rich October leaves of the forest a rainbow from the firmament had surely fallen. As I came, she was murmuring in a low under-tone, which trembled with fervor, the words of a Catholic hymn:

Sancta Maria! turn thine eyes
Upon the sinner's sacrifice
Of fervent prayer, and humble love,
From thy holy throne above.

At morn, at noon, at twilight dim,
Maria! thou hast heard my hymn.
In joy and wo, in good and ill,
Mother of God! be with me still.

When my hours flew gently by,
And no storms were in the sky,
My soul, lest it should truant be,
Thy love did guide to thine and thee.

Now, when clouds of Fate o'ercast
All my Present, and my Past,
Let my Future radiant shine
With sweet hopes of thee and thine.

'It is a day of days'—said Morella—'a day of all days either to live or die. It is a fair day for the sons of Earth and Life—ah! more fair for the daughters of Heaven and Death.'

I turned towards her, and she continued.

'I am dying—yet shall I live. Therefore for me, Morella, thy wife, hath the charnel house no terrors—mark me!—not even the terrors of the worm. The days have never been when thou couldst love me; but her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore.'

'Morella!'

'I repeat that I am dying. But within me is a pledge of that affection—ah, how little! which you felt for me, Morella. And when my spirit departs shall the child live—thy child and mine, Morella's. But thy days shall be days of sorrow—that sorrow which is the most lasting of impressions, as the cypress is the most enduring of trees. For the hours of thy happiness are over, and Joy is not gathered twice in a life, as the roses of Paestum twice in a year. Thou shalt not, then, play the Teian with Time, but, being ignorant of the myrtle and the vine, thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on earth, like the Moslemin at Mecca.'

'Morella!'—I cried—'Morella! how knowest thou this?'—but she turned away her face upon the pillow, and, a slight tremor coming over her limbs, she thus died, and I heard her voice no more.

Yet, as she had foreseen, her child—to which in dying she had given birth, and which breathed not till the mother breathed no more—her child, a daughter, lived. And she grew strangely in size and intellect, and was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed, and I loved her with a love more fervent and more intense than I believed it possible to feel on earth.

But ere long the Heaven of this pure affection became overcast; and Gloom, and Horror, and Grief came over it in clouds. I said the child grew strangely in stature and intelligence. Strange indeed was her rapid increase in bodily size—but terrible, oh! terrible were the tumultuous thoughts which crowded upon me while watching the development of her mental being. Could it be otherwise, when I daily discovered in the conceptions of the child the adult powers and faculties of the woman?—when the lessons of experience fell from the lips of infancy? and when the wisdom or the passions of maturity I found hourly gleaming from its full and speculative eye? When, I say, all this became evident to my appalled senses—when I could no longer hide it from my soul, nor throw it off from those perceptions which trembled to receive it, is it to be wondered at that suspicions of a nature fearful and exciting crept in upon my spirit, or that my thoughts fell back aghast upon the wild tales and thrilling theories of the entombed Morella? I snatched from the scrutiny of the world a being whom Destiny compelled me to adore, and in the rigid seclusion of my ancestral home, I watched with an agonizing anxiety over all which concerned my daughter.

And as years rolled away, and daily I gazed upon her eloquent and mild and holy face, and pored over her maturing form, did I discover new points of resemblance in the child to her mother—the melancholy and the dead. And

hourly grew darker these shadows, as it were, of similitude, and became more full, and more definite, and more perplexing, and to me more terrible in their aspect. For that her smile was like her mother's I could bear—but then I shuddered at its too perfect identity: that her eyes were Morella's own I could endure—but then they looked down too often into the depths of my soul with Morella's intense and bewildering meaning. And in the contour of the high forehead, and in the ringlets of the silken hair, and in the wan fingers which buried themselves therein, and in the musical tones of her speech, and above all—oh! above all, in the phrases and expressions of the dead on the lips of the loved and the living, I found food for consuming thought and horror—for a worm that would not die.

Thus passed away two lustrums of her life, yet my daughter remained nameless upon the earth. 'My child' and 'my love' were the designations usually prompted by a father's affection, and the rigid seclusion of her days precluded all other intercourse. Morella's name died with her at her death. Of the mother I had never spoken to the daughter—it was impossible to speak. Indeed during the brief period of her existence the latter had received no impressions from the outward world but such as might have been afforded by the narrow limits of her privacy. But at length the ceremony of baptism presented to my mind in its unnerved and agitated condition, a present deliverance from the horrors of my destiny. And at the baptismal font I hesitated for a name. And many titles of the wise and beautiful, of antique and modern times, of my own and foreign lands, came thronging to my lips—and many, many fair titles of the gentle, and the happy and the good. What prompted me then to disturb the memory of the buried dead? What demon urged me to breathe that sound, which, in its very recollection, was wont to make ebb and flow the purple blood in tides from the temples to the heart? What fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I shrieked within the ears of the holy man the syllables, Morella? What more than fiend convulsed the features of my child, and overspread them with the hues of death, as, starting at that sound, she turned her glassy eyes from the Earth to Heaven, and falling prostrate upon the black slabs of her ancestral vault, responded 'I am here!'

Distinct, coldly, calmly distinct—like a knell of death—horrible, horrible death, sank the eternal sounds within my soul. Years—years may roll away, but the memory of that epoch—never! Now was I indeed ignorant of the flowers and the vine—but the hemlock and the cypress overshadowed me night and day. And I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my Fate faded from

Heaven, and, therefore, my spirit grew dark, and the figures of the earth passed by me like flitting shadows, and among them all I beheld only—Morella. The winds of the firmament breathed but one sound within my ears, and the ripples upon the sea murmured evermore—Morella. But she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first in the charnel where I laid the second—Morella.