The German ghost stories that inspired Frankenstein (Part 1)

13 October 2019, By William Nehra

Everyone knows the story of Frankenstein’s Monster, but did you know that its origins lie in a competition and a collection of German ghost stories? The story goes like this: in the summer of 1816, Frankenstein's creator, Mary Shelley, was visiting the famous poet Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati in Switzerland, along with a group of elite writer friends.

But the weather was so terrible that "Year without a Summer" that the group was forced to stay inside. Sitting around a fire, they amused themselves by reading from the Fantasmagoriana (Tales of the Dead), a French anthology of German horror stories. Byron was so inspired (or perhaps spooked!) by the stories that, by the time dawn broke, he had challenged everyone to write their own ghost stories.

The Fantasmagoriana

The stories the assembled guests came up with would go on to become some of the most iconic and well-known horror stories ever told, including Frankenstein and the Vampyre. So what had the writers so spooked and inspired?

Well, gather round everyone because it's time to listen to some of these frightfully entertaining - and sometimes downright bonkers - tales, full of wonder, intrigue and... ghost barbers?

*Stumme Liebe* – Johann Karl August Musäus

*Stumme Liebe* (Dumb Love) is first story of the Fantasmagoriana and tells the story of Franz, an unlucky fellow who has lost his father and family fortune, and has been forced to move to the a most undesirable part of the city of Bremen.

Here he spies a beautiful woman called Meta but, considering his frankly terrifying financial situation, he cannot bring himself to declare his love. (Thus, their love is silent or "dumb"). In the hopes of raising money, he does what any young lad would do (besides find himself a job) and leaves the city to collect the debts owed to his late father.

On his travels, Franz is forced to take shelter in a haunted castle. During the night, he awakens to a terrible (if not predictable) sight: a ghost standing over him, sharpening
razors. The ghost indicates to Franz to sit down, which he does - because why wouldn't you listen to a razor wielding ghost? - and the ghost proceeds to shave all the hair from his head.

The story continues with Franz, in turn, shaving the ghostly figure, in order to free it from a curse (duh!). In return, the spectre tells Franz how to restore his former wealth. The ghost's instructions lead him to buried treasure and Franz, having regained his fortune, proposes to and marries Meta. Quite a happy ending, for a horror story.

**Die Bilder der Ahnen – Johann August Apel**

This story is called “The Family Portraits” and follows Count Ferdinand Meltheim as he travels to meet the woman his mother has destined him to marry. He stops at a village, where he joins a group of people who are telling ghost stories to entertain themselves (they didn't have TVs in those days). One girl, Clotilde, recounts a story of how her friend (who turns out to be Ferdinand’s sister) died when a huge portrait of her great-grandmother, Bertha, fell on her.

Ferdinand is shocked. He recounts a similar story about him staying with his friend and his sister, Emily, and their twin brothers. The twins were terrified by a portrait of their ancestor, Ditmar. One night after putting the twins to sleep, Ferdinand noticed the ghostly figure of Ditmar enter the room. He ran to the door and pulled it open in time to see the ghost kiss the two sleeping kids on the cheek. The children died the following day.

Through the discovery of Ditmar’s will it is discovered that Ditmar and his one-time-fiancée Bertha were cursed. Long ago, Ditmar’s rival, Bruno, laid a curse of them after Ditmar attacked and killed Bruno for stealing Bertha from him. If you're lost at this point, you're not alone.

Their ghosts were trapped in family portraits and condemned to murdering family members until the houses of Bruno and Ditmar were united by love. Ferdinand, a descendant of Bruno through Bertha, and Emily, a descendant of Ditmar, married and thus ends the curse.

**Der Todtenkopf – Friedrich Laun**

“The Death’s Head” tells the story of a lead actor named Calzolaro, who has arrived in a town with his troop of performers. He is there to contest the will of his father, who as the town’s schoolmaster, disapproved of Calzolaro’s profession and left his inheritance to a distant female relative (in the 19th century, this was the ultimate burn).

An old colonel named Keilholm invites Calzolaro to perform at his inn to the townspeople. He expresses an interest in ventriloquism and so sends a sexton (a
church officer) to fetch a human skull from the graveyard so Calzolaro can “speak” to the dead. We know what you're thinking - this can't possibly end well.

During the performance, Calzolaro uses the point of his sword to lift the skull to talk to it. The audience watches on with delight as Calzolaro screams and appears to faint on the floor. Cries of "Bravo!" and "What an amazing actor!" ring out as they shower him in applause. Calzolaro, who is roused by the applause, screams again and throws the skull straight out the window. He explains to the baffled audience members that, when he held the skull up, it was the face of his father that looked back at him.

Colonel Keilholm hastily finds the sexton, who explains that he used Calzolaro’s father’s actual skull and that he has now been laid to rest. He explains that children who speak to their parents’ skulls hear from them later that night.

Calzolaro does what any sane person who has just seen their dead teacher-father’s disembodied face would do: He drops out of the performance troop and becomes a schoolmaster. He also drops his challenge against his father's will and eventually meets his distant relative. Over time, they fall in love and marry (weird), and when Calzolaro takes his new wife by the hands he hears his father’s voice blessing their union (also weird).

Die Totenbraut – Friedrich Laun
This story of the “Death Bride” is told from the point of view of a marquis, who is speaking to friends at a party. He recounts how he was staying with a Count and his two twin daughters Ida and Hildegarde, who were identical apart from a red birthmark on Hildegarde’s neck.

Hildegarde had died the year before and so everyone was surprised when a Duke called Marino arrived to ask her hand in marriage. The Duke told the Count that he remembered seeing her in a Parisian museum, which was odd since Hildegarde had never been to Paris, but he insisted that it must have been her due to her birthmark.

The Count, seemingly unperturbed by some random guy chasing his daughter across Europe, eventually agrees to let Marino marry Ida instead. However the marquis, unbeknownst to the Count, knows that Marino is actually betrothed to someone else. Upon enquiring about his betrothed, Marino tells the marquis that she was unfaithful. However, it is revealed that Marino has forsaken his fiancée for Ida.

Seeking to scare him out of the marriage, the marquis tells Marino the story of Death’s Bride. In the story, a man named Filippo calls upon a spirit to aid him in marrying the beautiful Clara, on the condition that, if he is ever unfaithful, the spirit will have its vengeance. Filippo, in a startling show of stupidity, then falls for another woman called
Camilla and they marry. At the wedding, a spirit reveals itself, only to Filippo, who dies in convulsions.

Marino, terrified by the story of Death's bride, confesses his infidelity. However the Count, who is turning out to be quite a bad father, allows the wedding to take place anyway. The ceremony is attended by a masked woman wearing a beautiful gown, who points at Marino and then leaves. The Count runs after her, but she disappears.

Later, at the reception, Ida grows tried of dancing and leaves. However, she quickly returns and takes Marino by the hand to their bed chamber. A few minutes later, Ida re-enters the room, asking for Marino, and the Count confusedly explains that she took him to the bedchamber not 5 minutes before. Upon arriving at the bedchamber, they find Marino's body, contorted on the floor.

The marquis searches around the town to find out what he can about Death’s Bride. Eventually it is revealed that she was scorned by a lover who then died. When she was to remarry, the spirit of her former lover visited her at the wedding and she died. She is cursed to walk the earth tempting men from their lovers - including the saucy Marino, who was tempted by Hildegarde in Paris.

The story ends with the police entering the party to arrest the marquis. However the marquis escapes and is never seen or heard from again. What seems to be scarier here? The Death Bride? Filippo's stupidity? Or the Count's apparent disregard for his daughter's future happiness by allowing her to marry Marino, the disloyal stalker? You decide.

Halloween is getting closer by the day, so get yourself in the mood with a second instalment of the terrifying (sort of) German ghost stories that inspired Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

**The second half of the Fantasmagoriana**

In case you need a recap, these spooky stories all come from a book called the Fantasmagoriana, which was read by Lord Byron, Mary Shelley and some other friends during an eerie trip to Switzerland. The tales inspired them to write their own horror stories - including classics such as Frankenstein’s Monster and The Vampyre.

So, in the spirit of the spooky season, here are four more terrifying tales for you to sink your teeth into!
“The Fated Hour,” begins (rather fittingly) with a ghost story. Two sisters, Maria and Amelia, are visiting their friend Florentina, who tells them about her dead sister Seraphina. Florentina had once seen Seraphina staring out of a window in their home. Following her gaze, Florentina saw what she was looking at: their father holding hands with Seraphina in the garden.

Maria and Amelia gasp; surely this could not be true. Continuing, Florentina tells them she hugged her sister, and when she did the figure walking with their father disappeared. At this point Maria looks on the verge of tears and so Florentina quickly changes the subject.

A few weeks later, Florentina’s father grows ill. He summons Florentina to his room and tells her that he spoke to Seraphina after she disappeared in the garden. He says that Seraphina died “on the ninth hour,” and that she prophesied he too would succumb to the same fate. When the clock strikes nine, Florentina’s father passes away. Before he dies, he warns Florentina never to marry, for Seraphina foretold that Florentina would not live through her wedding night.

But Florentina’s hand has already been promised to a Count. On the day of her marriage, she summons Maria and Amelia to her bridal chamber. She tells them she will die at nine that evening. When the fated hour finally rolls around, the doors to the chamber fly open and Seraphina’s ghost stands in the doorway. Florentina runs to hug her sister and promptly dies on the spot. Not the best end to a wedding party...

This story is called “The Revenant” and focuses on the sad life of Julien Soller. Julien (who is actually a girl) wants to marry Dr. Gustav Hess, but her father, who has developed the useful ability to see ghosts, refuses. He claims to have seen Gustav’s ghost - and, as everybody knows, if you see the ghost of someone who is alive, then they have a most suspicious character.

Julien convinces her father to let her marry Hess. For a while they are happy but after two failed pregnancies they grow apart. One summer, Gustav travels alone for his summer holidays. Not long after his departure Julien receives two notes, one saying her husband has fallen ill and one telling her husband has died.

One night Julien sees her husband’s figure in her bedroom. Knowing of her father’s abilities she is convinced it is Gustav’s ghost and speaks openly about it to friends. The tales of her ghostly encounters are eventually published.

At a social gathering she is approached by a friend of her husband. Herr von Rosen, who is a sensible fellow, attempts to give a reasonable explanation for her ghost stories.
He tries to convince her that her husband is alive and the figure she saw was actually him checking on her. He reminds her she has never seen her husband’s dead body.

Julien tells him she only wishes this could be true and despite his reasoned attempts at logic she continues to disbelieve him. That is, until her husband walks out from behind a door to tell her that he is in fact alive (who saw that coming?!?) and that he had only left as he needed some time apart and instead of divorcing, he faked his death.

Gustav tells Julien that her outspokenness on seeing his ghost made him realise her devotion to him. He wants to take her away and so they sell off her belongings and move away under a fake name. Weren’t they all dead romantic back then?

_Die Graue Stube_ – Heinrich Clauren

The story of “the grey chamber” starts with the Secretary Blendau travelling to Italy with his family. During their journey they pass close by the home of Blendau’s old guardian Ober-Amtmann. Blendau decides to spend a night at his old friend’s house and heads there alone (never a good idea in a horror story).

After catching up with his friend, Amtmann says he is welcome to stay, but he must wait for his wife to return so she can make up his sleeping quarters. A maid mentions that there is a fresh bed in the grey room but Amtmann dismisses the suggestion - the room cannot be used because of the “Damsel of the Castle”.

Blendau realises he had forgotten about the Damsel of the Castle, who had long ago lived there. She intended to take the oath and become a nun. However, she was raped in the grey room by Count Hugo the Black, and for some reason this means that she, rather than the Count, was cursed for 300 years (sure, that seems fair...) The poor Damsel ended up killing herself by drinking poison. Since then, legend has it, her ghost waits in the grey room every night for Hugo to return.

“Bah! Such fairy tales don’t scare me anymore!” exclaims Blendau, as he marches into the grey room, locking the door behind him. He quickly falls asleep but, at midnight, he wakes to the feel of cold drops falling on his face. When he opens his eyes, he sees the Damsel standing over him, a dagger in hand.

Blendau screams and runs for a small door but when he opens it, the skeletal figure of Hugo is standing there. Blendau staggers back and rushes for the bed and throws the covers over his head. Hugo rushes towards the Damsel and then all is silent.

Blendau doesn't dare poke his head out from under the covers until morning. When he sees that the candles in his room, full the night before, have burnt down completely, he
realises to his terror that the last night was not a dream. Now Blendau has a
dilemma: no one truly believes in the ghost of the Damsel, as no one uses the grey
room and so hasn’t had the pleasure of seeing her. He knows he will be ridiculed if he
tells his story but, on the other hand, he cannot spend another night in the cursed room.

So, he does what any self-respecting man would do: he jumps back on his horse and
rides off into the night, back to his family, never to return again.

Die schwarze Kammer – Johann August Apel
This story starts with two people discussing the story of the grey chamber (sounds
spooky, huh?). One man, a schoolteacher, questions the story, which draws a heated
response from August Bärmann, a city doctor.

He believes the tales of the grey chamber, as he has had a similar experience. As a
young physician he had to make house calls, and on one occasion he was called to
the castle of Lieutenant Colonel of Silberstein, whose daughter suffered from anxiety.
They begged him to stay the night in case they might need him again.

Bärmann agreed and was showed to his room, where the walls and furniture were
painted black (great interior design). The castle huntsman informed him that the room,
“the Black Chamber”, is haunted. Bärmann scoffed at the idea, there were obviously no
such things as ghosts. He bade the hunter goodnight and promptly went to sleep.

Bärmann awoke to someone softly calling his name. The room was pitch black but
suddenly the lights came on and Bärmann fell, trying to adjust the sudden brightness.
He felt a hand touch his arm and he slowly turned his head round. Bärmann was not
proud of the loud, high-pitched scream he let out, but he didn’t care; a deathly pale
figure was right there in the bed next to him.

Suddenly, the lights went off again and when Bärmann finally got them back on he only
found a lock of hair on his pillow. Almost immediately, he was summoned to his
patients’ room. The Colonel’s daughter had died.

“Ghosts don’t leave hair on pillows, you…” starts the schoolmaster. However, it is at this
point that their friend, Wermuth, steps in. “What are you two gossiping about, then?”
The two tell him Bärmann’s story and to their surprise Wermuth offers an explanation.

His friend Tippel, a lawyer, recently had an appointment at Silberstein castle and spent
the night in the black chamber. The next morning, he did not emerge from the room and
when the door was forced open, they found Tippel unconscious. Once revived, he told
them that he heard knocking on the chamber door and, terrified beyond comprehension, he curled up in the fireplace.

He blinked and saw a ghostly woman standing right in front of him, staring up at a cabinet filled with gold and silver. At this point, overcome with terror, Tippel fainted.

The next day the fireplace is examined, and they find a switch that revolves the fireplace into another, larger room. A cabinet stands proudly in the middle, just like the one Tippel described, but empty. The chambermaid is called in to explain but her and the huntsman are nowhere to be found. It seems they had been using the revolving door to steal from the castle and its guests and, just like real ghosts, vanish as soon as they were caught. Naughty, eh?