

A Note on Vampires

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

Of all denizens of the ghost-world, vampires are the most horrible. A vampire has been defined by an eighteenth-century writer as “a dead body which continues to live in the grave, which it leaves, however, by night for the purpose of sucking the blood of the living, whereby it is nourished and preserved in good condition, instead of being decomposed like other dead bodies.”

According to the old authorities, the people who mostly become vampires are witches, wizards, suicides, those who have been cursed and those who have come to violent ends. There is also a prevalent theory that the illegitimate sons of parents who are themselves both illegitimate are peculiarly liable to become vampirized.

If a cat or any other animal leaps over a dead body or a bird flies over it, the corpse may become a vampire.

The chief remedy when, on opening a grave, the body is found to be vampirized, is to thrust a white-thorn stake through the heart, which renders the vampire harmless, or else cut off the head and put it back in the coffin with the mouth filled with garlic. Though vampires can enter hermetically sealed vessels, they cannot pass through cracks. Nothing disturbs their well-being except either garlic or betony leaves or a stake thrust through the heart.

I have just come across, in manuscript, the following vampire story which is, I think, worth telling here.

A French Viscount—de Moreive by name—was one of the very few French noblemen who managed to retain their estates during the troublous times of the French Revolution. He was an extraordinary-looking man, very tall and thin, with a high, almost pointed forehead and four very protruding teeth.

Under an air of suave courtesy and kindness he concealed a ferociously cruel disposition, which showed itself when the fires of the great Revolution had burnt themselves out and all was once more quiet. To get level, as it were, with the working classes, he sent for his retainers and work-people, one by one, and after he had interviewed them, cut their heads off. It is not surprising to hear that in return he himself met his death by assassination at the hands of some of the peasantry.

No sooner was the Viscount laid in the grave than an appalling number of young children died in the neighbourhood, all of whom bore vampiric marks at their throats. Later on, when he had been buried some time and while the tomb was being repaired, there were nine more cases in a single week. The awful series went on until seventy-two years passed away and the Viscount's grandson succeeded to the title.

Young de Moreive, hearing the appalling stories of his late grandfather, consulted a priest, with the idea of laying his horrible ancestor's ghost, and after some discussion and delay it was decided to open the tomb.

The services of a man specially successful in such cases were obtained, and the vault was opened in the presence of the authorities.

Every coffin was found to have undergone the usual process of rotting away, except that of the old Viscount, which—after seventy-two years—was perfectly sound and strong. The lid was removed and the body was found quite fresh and free from decomposition. The face was florid,

and there was blood in the heart and chest. The skin was soft and natural. New nails had grown on the hands and feet.

The body was removed from the coffin, and a white-thorn stake was driven, by the expert, through the heart of the corpse, with the ghastly result that blood and water flowed and the corpse groaned and screamed. Then the remains were burnt on the sea-shore, and from that day the child-deaths ceased and there was no more mystic crime in the neighbourhood.

The family archives were searched, and it was found that the old Viscount had originally come from Persia, where he married an Indian wife, and afterwards took up residence in France, where he became a naturalized subject. The vampiric taint was in his mother.

Another case I have heard of is that of a man who became vampirish through being bitten by a vampire bat. There are two kinds of these ghoulish creatures, both of which frequent the tropics. Darwin himself, who spoke of the incredulity with which such cannibalism was regarded in England, caught one of these bats in the act of sucking the blood from a horse, and has put the incident on record.

The man whose case was related to me heard horrible sounds of laughter round his death-bed, which he affirmed on oath to a priest came from five women with protruding teeth, very red lips and high colours, who were standing round his death-bed with hands outstretched towards him. He practised vampirism before and after death, and his body, even after a number of years, failed to decay. It was eventually rendered harmless by the usual methods of garlic and stake. His confession to the priest of the Order of Cicestrians is carefully preserved among the Cicestrian Records at Palermo.

At one period vampirism spread through Servia and Wallacia like a pestilence, and in the east of Europe it is still strongly believed in. There is the well-known case of Arnod Paola, who lived at Meducgna, near Belgrade, in the early part of the eighteenth century, whose grave was publicly opened in the cemetery of Meducgna when, to the horror of the spectators, the lips were found to be covered with fresh blood. The body was taken out and burnt to ashes.

Another case, mentioned by Erasmus Francisci, is of a man named Grando, who lived in the district of Kring, and being believed to be vampirish was exhumed.

“When they opened his grave,” says Francisci, “after he had been long buried, his face was found with a colour and his features made natural sorts of movements as if the dead man smiled. He even opened his mouth as if he would inhale fresh air. They held the crucifix before him and called in a loud voice, ‘See! this is Jesus Christ who redeemed your soul from hell and died for you.’ After the sound had acted on his organs of hearing and he had connected, perhaps, some ideas from it, tears began to flow from the dead man’s eyes. Finally, when, after a short prayer, they proceeded to hack off his head, the corpse uttered a screech and turned and rolled just as if he had been alive—and the grave was full of blood.”

Although some medical authorities endeavour to account for the numerous cases of vampirism on record by the explanation that the bodies have been buried alive while in a state of catalepsy or suspended animation, it is somewhat disquieting to turn to a document signed by three surgeons, one lieutenant-colonel and one sub-lieutenant, dated June 7, 1732, of undoubted veracity. This document is the medical report on the opening of the graves of those suspected of vampirism in the cemetery of Meducgna, near Belgrade. It gives details of thirteen cases of exhumation of bodies all in the vampire condition, of which the following is typical— A woman of the name of Miliza, who had died at the end of a three months’ illness. The body had been buried ninety and odd days. In the chest was liquid blood. The body was declared by the

Heydukes, who recognized it, to be in better condition and fatter than it had been in the woman's legitimate lifetime.

A weird description of the horrors of vampire-haunting is given by an anonymous writer in the 'fifties—

“You are lying in your bed at night, thinking of nothing but sleep, when you see by the faint light that is in your bed-chamber a shape entering at the door and gliding towards you with a long sigh, as of the wind across the open fields, when darkness had fallen upon them. The Thing moves along the air as if by the mere act of volition, and it has a human visage and figure. The eyes stare wildly from the head; the hair is bristling; the flesh is livid; the mouth is bloody.

“You lie still—like one under the influence of the nightmare—and the Thing floats slowly over you. Presently you fall into a deep sleep or swoon, retaining up to the latest minute of consciousness the fixed and glassy stare of the phantom. When you awake in the morning you think it is all a dream, until you perceive a small blue, deadly-looking spot on your chest, near the heart, and the truth flashes on you. You say nothing of the matter to your friends, but you are a doomed man—and you know it rightly. For every night comes the horrible shape to your bedside, with a face that seems horrified at itself and sucks your life-blood in your sleep. You feel it is useless to endeavour to avoid the visitation by changing your room or your locality. You are under a sort of cloud of Fate.”