

THE HEAD OF DRAKULA

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Vampire story I wrote in the late 1980s.

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Slowly I walked around the small, dim-lit store. Long, rectangular wooden benches stacked high with an enormous collection of used clothing, faded bronze or copper knickknacks, and antique bonbonnière, divided the single room into four thin aisles. The front of the store was comprised of one great floor-to-ceiling length plate-glass window, giving a clear view of the busy street outside and the passing people from the knees down. The other three walls were covered in bookcases containing literally thousands of one-centimetre thick, near new Mills and Boon paperback romantic novels, priced at thirty cents each.

Fine cobwebs and a thin patina of dust coated everything, seeming almost to increase before my eyes. As though sensing my thoughts, a large, hairy black spider dropped a thin line from the jaundice-yellow ceiling and scampered down to the glossy surface of a fleshy pink paperback. For a few moments the spider crawled around the cover, as though reading the title, before returning to its mooring rope to swiftly scamper back up, to disappear amid an assortment of dirty black spots that covered the ceiling. â My feelings exactly!â I thought, never one for romantic novels.

As my feet began to ache, I looked up toward the plate glass window, wondering what chance I had of getting home in time for dinner. My wife, Irene, had on more than one occasion thrown my food into the rubbish bin when I had been more than ten minutes late. As Irene loved to say, â If I can find the time to cook it, the least you can do is be home in time to eat it. Instead of wasting your precious time and our money browsing through dirty, second-hand shops!â

I must admit that Irene is right: I do have a mania for browsing through broken down second-hand shops; buying all manner of unrelated brass or wooden relics from bygone eras. Our mantelpiece and the tops of the cupboards and counters at home are laden with dozens of small souvenirs from my frequent forays into the past. Much to the disgust of Irene who often bemoans not only the effect it has on our Visa Card, but also the extra work it creates for her, since she has to shift every piece by hand when cleaning and dusting.

This time, however, it look as though our Visa would get off scot-free, and I would get home in time to beat the garbage bin to my dinner, I hoped, glancing down at my antique iron fob watch -- the prize from a recent foray into second-hand paradise.

I had nearly reached the front of the shop again, moving down the last aisle, and still no treasure had caught my eye. But then, at the very front of the counter, only a step or two from the front door, where I should have seen it the instant I had entered the store, half an hour earlier, sat a large, black wooden box.

A gleeful sounding â Ha humâ caught my attention. I looked up toward the proprietor of the shop, Stefan Bathory, a tall, grey-haired old man of seemingly a hundred years of age, if not decidedly more, who stood half a step away from me. For the previous half an hour the old man had been following me around the shop, producing prices out of his head if I so much as glanced toward a faded plaster bust of Napoleon, or a chipped walnut clock. As I stopped before the black box the old man â Ha-hummedâ then announced:

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“The head of Drakula!”

“Huh?” I responded.

“The head of Drakula,” repeated Old Stefan.

I stared gape-mouthed toward the old man, trying to decide if this were some kind of weird Romanian joke; wondering what the punch line would be. However, there was nothing jocular about his pale grey eyes, and certainly no trace of a smile about the deep lines of the pale grey skin of his ancient, time-worn face.

“What?” I asked, wondering whether I had misheard, twice. Then after Old Stefan repeated it a second time, I said, “But Dracula is only a fictional character!” After all I had read Bram Stoker’s novel, of course, and had even watched Christopher Lee’s shadow creep eerily down the staircase in *The House of Dracula*, in defiance of the legend that vampires cast no shadow.

“No, no, not the fictional character!” insisted the old man, “The real Drakula!” Then seeing my blank look, “Vlad Tepes! When Bram Stoker’s novel was first published in England in 1897, it caused a sensation for more reasons than one. A lot of people were amazed by the great degree of accuracy Stoker displayed in the descriptions of the Carpathian Mountains in the early parts of the novel. It was rumoured that the book was actually a fictionalisation of a true story! The biggest stumbling block to the idea of a real life Dracula -- other than the fact that there is no such thing as a blood-sucking vampire! -- was the name itself. Historically the letter ‘ă’ at the end of a name indicates the female form of a name: Paula female for Paul; Petra for Peter; Roberta for Robert, and so on. Which at first led many people to speculate that the real Dracula might have been a woman. An idea put forward some years back by Raymond T. McNally in his book, *Dracula Was a Woman*, in which he much maligned a distant ancestor of mine, Elizabeth Bathory. A kind-hearted, god-fearing woman who was cruelly slandered by the royalty of her time, who accused her of vampirism, solely as a means of stealing her fortune and lands....”

The old man “Ha-hummed” again, then continued: “In the 1950s an American of Romanian boyar descent, Radu Florescu, discovered that in ancient Wallachia the letter ‘ă’ was used at the end of a word, the same way that the Scottish use ‘O’ or ‘Mac’ at the front of a word; the Irish use ‘Mc’; the French ‘du’; the Dutch ‘van’; the German ‘von’; the Spanish ‘de’; the Italians ‘di’ or ‘da’, and so on. In all cases the prefix means ‘son of’: O’ Donald means ‘son of Donald’; van Johnson means ‘son of Johnson’, de Winters means ‘son of Winters’, and so on. Likewise Dracula, or Drakula to use the historically correct spelling, means son of Drakul. In ancient Romanian, Drakul means the Devil, so Drakula means ‘the son of the Devil’.”

As discretely as possible I yawned into one hand, trying my best not to look bored by Old Stefan’s history lesson. Glancing down at my fob watch again, I wondered if I still had time to save my dinner from the garbage if I made a mad dash for the door immediately? Obviously sensing my thoughts the old man stepped between me and the door, fixed me with a withering look, and continued with his monologue:

“Dracula, or Vlad Tepes as he was more commonly known, was a descendant of the ancient Wallachian princes. He lived in the fifteenth century and ruled Wallachia, off-and-on, from about 1450 to 1476. Although worshipped by his own people, for his valour against the Turks, Dracula was known outside Transylvania mainly for his cruelty and love of impaling.”

Old Man Bathory paused to see what effect this revelation had on me, and to try to gauge if it had increased his chances of selling me the shiny, wooden box. After a few seconds he continued: “Dracula was known for his savage form of justice. When he first came to power, the country had been bled dry by the parasitic boyar class, so, to celebrate his coronation Dracula invited all the boyars to a great feast inside a huge,

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wooden building. Then he locked the building tight and burnt it to the ground, with the boyars still inside. On another occasion a visiting merchant was robbed while passing through Drakula's province. Drakula personally reimbursed the merchant, then tracked down and savagely killed the robbers. On still another occasion a visiting diplomat refused to doff his cap to the prince, claiming that it was against his religious beliefs, although in truth it was intended as a snub. Drakula had the diplomat's cap nailed to his head to help him practice his religion.

However, Drakula's favourite form of barbarity by far, was impaling. Drakula would have men, women, and children impaled by the hundreds for little or no reason. He had sharpened wooden stakes driven up through the anus with men, or through the vagina with women, taking great care not to kill them as the stakes were forced high up into their bodies. Then the stakes would be planted like trees in the great lawns surrounding Drakula's Castle Bran. The impaled people would writhe around atop the stakes, sometimes for hours or even days before dying. Sometimes Drakula would have so many people impaled that the stakes would be as plentiful as a forest of trees. On such occasions Drakula liked to sit at a wooden table beneath the stakes to feast, revelling in the stench of decay from the dead and the piteous screams of the dying. On one such occasion a visiting envoy complained about the stench, so Drakula had him impaled upon a much longer stake so that the envoy would be above and thus out of reach of the stench.

I stood in silence staring at the black box for a few seconds, before realising that Old Stefan had finished his monologue. "What has all this got to do with a black painted box?" I said at last.

"Not painted!" insisted Old Man Bathory indignantly. "Black wood!"

"From the enchanted forest, no doubt?" I suggested, receiving another withering look from Old Man Bathory.

At last, seeing that his evil-eye had failed to paralyse me, the old man said, "Black wood from the lush forests of fifteenth century Transylvania, polished to a royal sheen, as befitting the head of a Wallachian prince. And inside this black box, rests the head of the infamous Prince Drakula himself!"

I thought about Old Stefan's claim for a moment, before saying, "But I thought that vampires had to be impaled through the heart!"

The old man fixed me with his evil-eye, which almost seemed as though it were about to pop out of its socket from rage at my stupidity. "Forget about vampires!" he bellowed. "This box contains the head of a fifteenth century Romanian prince, Vlad the Impaler, Vlad Tepes, also known as Drakula. The idea of impaling vampires through the heart is obviously a historical error; a corruption of Drakula's habit of impaling his enemies of spikes...Although...."

He stopped to rub the light fuzz on his chin ruminatively for a few moments, as though trying to dredge up some personal memory of Vlad Drakula. It was an only too obvious stage effect, to attempt to justify whatever weird and wonderful revelation Old Stefan chose to conjure up, in a bid to con me into buying the shiny black box. A box which could contain almost anything -- or nothing at all for that matter -- except the head of a 500 year old Wallachian prince.

Finally he said, "Come to think of it though, Drakula was impaled himself, or at least his head was...He was killed by his own men after dressing up as a Turk, to sneak down to spy on the invading Turkish army. The Turks then overran Wallachia and found Drakula's corpse. They beheaded the body, which they burnt, then impaled the head in plain view so that the Wallachians would know that Drakula was dead and could never return to help expel them. The head of Drakula stayed impaled for nearly a week before being taken down and secreted away by one of my ancestors, Gregori Bathory...."

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“The head of Drakula has remained in my family for the last 500 years. It was taken from Wallachia to England in the 1480s, then to the USA, via the Mayflower, in 1620, then finally to Victoria seventy years ago when my wife, Bella, and I emigrated to Australia.”

I couldn't help smiling at the clever way that Old Man Bathory had explained away the problem of how the skull had travelled nearly 16,000 kilometres and 500 years, from fifteenth century Wallachia to twentieth century Australia.

Seeing my smile and obviously mistaking it for a smile of satisfaction, Old Stefan hurried to add, “So naturally I could not part with such a rare and valuable, family heirloom too cheaply.”

“How, not too cheaply?” I asked, and to hell with grammar.

“Ten dollars?” suggested the old man hopefully, before quickly amending it to; “Eight dollars? Six dollars? Five dollars?”

“How do I know there's anything in the box at all?” I asked, deciding to myself that at \$5 it was a good buy, even if the box was empty. It would do more than passably as a birthday present for Irene, as a jewellery box or some such thing. Unless, of course, it really did contain the 500 year old head of a dead Wallachian prince, in which case it would probably join my dinner in the garbage bin. The box was a good size, certainly large enough to contain an average-sized head, glossy black, with an intricately embossed, expensive-looking gold coloured latch and keyhole, minus a key. A fact which I quickly brought to the attention of Old Stefan.

Looking startled the old man demanded to know, “What do you want a key for?” As though it were a totally unreasonable request.

“What's the point in owning a locked box, without a key to unlock it?” I asked.

“It contains the rotting head of a 500 year old Wallachian prince,” insisted Old Man Bathory. “What would you want to look at it for?” Which would have been a perfectly reasonable question, if the old man hadn't already forced me to sacrifice my evening meal to the garbage bin, in a bid to talk me into purchasing the black box.

“How do I know there's anything in the box at all?” I said for the second time, to the obvious consternation of Old Stefan. Whose look of consternation quickly changed to one of alarm when I held it up to ear level and began to shake the box gently in a bid to determine the contents.

“Watch out!” warned Old Man Bathory as an ear-piercing shriek rang out from the ornate keyhole, causing me to drop the black wooden box to the concrete floor of the small second-hand shop.

“It does that sometimes,” explained the old man, as the blood drained from my face and I began to run toward the door to the outside street. Of course, I had read the various accounts, both fact and fiction alike, of screaming skulls -- decapitated heads which let out piercing shrieks for one reason or another. But to encounter one for myself in real life was a little more than I was able to cope with.

It was only as my feet touched the bitumen footpath outside the shop that I realised that it was obviously a sales gimmick which had gone wrong. As the wooden box hit the hard concrete floor and smashed to pieces, Old Stefan had let out a scream almost as dreadful as the one which had resounded from within the shiny black wood box. Obviously, I realised, the old man's scream had been a scream of dismay at the loss of a valuable piece of bric-a-brac, which he had spent an awful lot of time over, devising an elaborate sales pitch.

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Cupping my hands in front of the glass to shield out the sunlight, I peered into the small shop, expecting to see Old Man Bathory, brush and sweep in hand, kneeling over the splintered remains of the wooden box.

Instead the old man stood at the back of the shop, staring down in horror toward the broken curio. The shattered box rustled and moved with a life of its own, like a gopher hole about to burst open to reveal a cute, furry little creature...But there was nothing cute or furry about the dirty, cracked and pitted skull which slowly burrowed its way out from under the small pile of rubble, to stare with vacant eye sockets toward where Old Stefan stood trembling half a dozen metres away.

After a moment the skull let out another piercing shriek, then hurtled through the air like a thrown baseball...Straight for the old man's neck, where the skull attached itself to the jugular vein and began to suck Old Stefan's blood.

As the skull drank, it slowly began to regenerate. The dirty black cracks began to close up and the faded greyish tinge began to give way to a gleaming bone white. Then flesh began to reappear upon the bone and the vacant eye sockets filled out with large, bloodshot yellow eyes. A thick bushy moustache sprouted beneath the newly formed, prominent nose; bushy brows grew above the eyes, and dark hair began to trail down to the start of where its back should have been.

That was all I saw before turning to flee.

* * *

A few days later I did some research at the local library and discovered a few facts about Vlad Tepes that Stefan Bathory hadn't known, or had forgotten. The old man was right about Drakula meaning a son of the Devil, however, it also meant a son of the dragon. And in ancient Bulgarian the words for dragon and vampire were interchangeable. Also, during his life time Drakula had been accused of vampirism. (Although admittedly only by the Turks, who had a vested interest in defaming Drakula who was the only thing preventing them from overrunning Wallachia!) Old Stefan had been only half right about Drakula's beheading. Drakula's head had been impaled upon a stake to demoralise the people of Wallachia, however, that was not the reason for his beheading. The idea of impaling a vampire through the heart is fiction invented by Hollywood. In Bram Stoker's novel, Dracula was killed by being beheaded with a Bowie knife. And, to this day, outside of movies, beheading is the only known way to kill a vampire! However, unbeknown to the Turks, you must then burn the head and body separately and scatter the ashes in two separate places, or else the body (or head!) can regenerate itself again into a whole vampire!

THE END

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