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VAMPIRE F^{RENSEN}REN SICS

UNCOVERING THE ORIGINS
OF AN ENDURING LEGEND

MARK COLLINS
JENKINS

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LA SERENISSIMA—“the Most Serene Republic”—is how we like to think of Venice, as she was during her golden age. The crumbling palaces, arched bridges, and exuberant churches topped by domes and campaniles all rise from that shimmering lagoon like mirages from the past. This is the Venice of our dreams.

And like all dreams, that Venice was an illusion. Today a World Heritage site, the Queen of the Adriatic attracts millions of tourists each year. Yet few of them cross the sparkling waters and visit Lazzaretto Nuovo Island, with its old quarantine station, high-walled hospital, and cemetery heaped with the bones of 16th- and 17th-century plague victims. Life had not always been serene in La Serenissima, as Dr. Matteo Borrini understood only too well. While directing an excavation of that cemetery in 2006, the forensic anthropologist had become puzzled by one broken skeleton in particular. Why, he wondered, had someone four centuries ago thrust a brick between its jaws? His quest for an answer, supported by a 2009 grant from the National Geographic Society, led him to uncover the legend of the “chewing dead,” plague-causing vampires stopped only by ramming stones or bricks in their mouths.

They are but one of the many species that have arisen from the long, evolving history of vampires. Follow their wandering tracks, and you will wend ever deeper into the nightmarish mazes of our most remote past.

YOU OPEN THE DOOR. There in the gathering twilight he stands, caped and fanged and glowering. In the streets behind him, spectral legions are on the move. It's Halloween, and the visitor on your doorstep must be all of six years old.

Vampire chic—it's everywhere. It's cool to be one, and certainly cool to love one, judging from the popularity of a certain number-one best seller that ends with the heroine wishing to become a vampire like her boyfriend. Now that they've come out of the coffin, so to speak, vampires have never appeared more sensitive or romantic. They have never been more heroic. And they have never been portrayed more sympathetically. One is wickedly reminded of something Dr. Lewis Thomas once wrote about biological parasites: "[T]here is nothing to be gained, in an evolutionary sense, by the capacity to cause illness and death. Pathogenicity may be something...more frightening to them than us."

American popular culture is in the midst of a vampire epidemic that has sunk its fangs into fashion, film, television, and publishing. Vampire trappings—pallid complexions, eyeliner, dark clothing—have outgrown their origins in the Goth look and crossed into the mainstream. The vampire is the "new James Dean," no less a cultural arbiter than the *New York Times* pronounced on July 2, 2009. And on Sunday nights, admittedly after the family hour, millions of television viewers curl up for the latest installment of vampire mayhem set in the bayous of Louisiana as HBO broadcasts its decidedly Grand Guignol series, *True Blood*.

It's all irresistibly good fun. As folklorist Michael Bell once put it, "What better food for the imagination than a creature that incorporates sex, blood, violence, shape-shifting, superhuman power and eternal life?"

Yet it is also a bewildering maze, a hall of mirrors in which—as, upon reflection, you'd expect—the original vampire is hard to see. Take *Dracula*: You can't find the porter for the baggage. As the *Irish Times* related when the novel of that name, written by its native son, was selected as the Dublin One City, One Book choice for 2009:

He's advertised throat lozenges, cat food, insecticide, pizza, security systems ("protects you against uninvited guests"), and many other products. He has been a breakfast cereal—Choculas. In the 170-odd movies in which *Dracula* was featured as a main or lesser character, he has been black (*Blacula*, 1972), deaf (*Deafula*, 1975, the first-ever "signed" film), gay (*Dragula*, 1973), a porn star (*Spermula*, 1976), and senile (John Carradine keeping his teeth in a glass by the side of the bed in *Nocturna*, 1978). He has met Billy the Kid, Abbott and Costello, the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, and the Outer Space Chicks.

Nor can we forget Bunnacula, the vampire rabbit who sucks plant juices, and Vampirella, the redoubtable comic-book heroine of the planet Draculon, where all the rivers once ran with blood. *Dracula* himself, in altered form, has even had his own comic-book adventures: Marvel's *Tomb of Dracula* and *Dracula Lives* turned the Transylvanian count into a kind of reverse superhero

Dracula and *Dracula Lives* turned the Transylvanian count into a kind of reverse superhero, impossible to kill or to keep down; at one point in his Marvel-ous escapades, the cartoon Dracula marshals a vampire army on the moon and launches his minions like missiles at Earth—all the while sporting his trademark evening clothes and cape.

At least there he was recognizably evil. In Fred Saberhagen's novel *The Dracula Tape*, he is not only more sinned against than sinning; he's not even guilty. The death and damage the main character wreaks in the original novel is instead laid at Abraham Van Helsing's feet; in Saberhagen's sympathetic reimagining, the stubborn vampire slayer is so deluded by superstition that he, not Dracula, leaves a trail of disaster behind him.

The vampire also enjoys a special prestige in the pantheon of ghouls. Given the choice, says Peter Nicholls, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, it's better to be a vampire than a werewolf or a zombie:

Vampires are aristocratic, drinking only the most refined substances, usually blood. In the iconography of horror, the vampire stands for sex. The werewolf, who stands for instability, shapeshifting, lack of self-control, is middle-class and lives in a dog-eat-dog world. The zombie or ghoul, who shambles and rots, is working-class, inarticulate, dangerous, deprived, wishing only to feed on those who are better off; in the iconography of horror the zombie stands for the exploited worker.

The vampire, who started life like that shambling zombie, has climbed the social ladder. In fact, he has pulled a very neat switch. Once the epitome of corruptible death, he has become a symbol of life—of life lived more intensely, more glamorously, and more wantonly, with bites having become kisses, than what passes for life on this side of the curtain. Add to that a practical immortality if you behave yourself, and one can appreciate the temptation always dangling before the Sookies and the Bellas and the Buffys to cross the line. In Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Hotel Transylvania*, the very human Madelaine spells out the vampire appeal: "To know your freedom. To live in the blood that is taken with love...I can hardly wait!"

Such characters are on the verge of deliberately choosing a fate their fictional ancestors would have considered abhorrent beyond all imagining. It's not just the old high-school romance given a new edge. It's not always rooted in the yearning to escape the strictures of society and convention. It also reflects a darker, more profound disenchantment, as Yarbro's Madelaine explains to her undead lover:

In my reading of history there is war and ruin and pillage and lives snuffed out with such profligacy that my breath is stopped by the senselessness of it. One would think that all humanity had nothing better than to feed on its own carrion. I have thought as I read these books, how many worse things there are in this world than vampires.

It wasn't always that way. Vampires certainly have evolved—to the point where it is now difficult, but still tantalizingly possible, to catch a glimpse of their terrible origins.

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL

Dracula may still hold court as king of the undead, but his reign is nearing its end, thanks largely to the explosion of competing vampire epics since the 1970s. Those curious enough to trace the

circuitous path by which the vampire arrived at his present mainstream status must survey these fictional worlds: ~~By pushing the old fiend in new directions, they will reveal much about his origins.~~

Dozens of modern sagas are out there, each attractively packaged and each boasting its own ardent fan base. The offerings differ as radically from one another as Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire* series (aka *True Blood*) distinguishes itself from Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, or as both of those are set apart from the 20 volumes (and counting) of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Saint-Germain epic, named for the enigmatic 18th-century French count and occultist who is her vampire hero. Comic book or novel, television spin-off or movie, most contemporary vampire tales honor the legend's supernatural grounding.

Rarely has the web of imagined vampire history been spun more intricately than in the ten novels, published from 1976 to 2003, that constitute Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*. Embodying a night world of Dickensian proportions, its leading characters—and there are many, including Lestat, Louis, Armand, David, and the child vampire Claudia—represent an alternate society, riven by the same jealousies, angers, resentments, and affections, organized along the same hierarchical lines, as those of the day world. With each new title Rice unveiled, the history of her elaborate alternative universe grew ever more complex. Ultimately it would come to embrace both God and the devil.

And where did it begin? In ancient Egypt, circa 4000 B.C., when an evil spirit fused with the flesh of Queen Akasha, mutated her heart and brain, and made her the world's first vampire. Akasha then turned her husband, King Enkil, into the second one, and their predations gave rise to the whole dark brood to come. That creation myth typifies many found throughout the vampire's fictional universe—a remarkable number of which coalesce in ancient Egypt, traditionally viewed as the cradle of all black arts.

Although the vampire was busily accumulating this vast store of supernatural histories, might he have garnered some natural ones as well? Science fiction, in fact, has extended and elaborated the vampire myth for years. Shunning the supernatural, it has offered ingenious empirical explanations of the phenomenon, ranging from bizarre psychological conditions to alien species to literal vampire plagues.

The vampire as alien may first have appeared in two works by French science-fiction pioneer Gustave Le Rouge. In *Le prisonnier de la planète Mars* (1908), the thought power of Hindu Brahman transports a young engineer to the fourth planet from the sun. There he discovers a fantastic biota that includes bat-winged, blood-drinking humanoid creatures. Some of them hitch a ride back to Earth, unleashing the epic battle that fills the pages of the sequel, *La guerre des vampires* (1909).

Miriam Blaylock, in Whitley Strieber's now-classic *The Hunger* (1981), is a vampire born in ancient Egypt several thousand years ago. As the daughter of Lamia, the child-devouring monster of myth, Blaylock suffers an eternal loneliness that has driven her to take a succession of mortal lovers as companions. Thanks to blood transfusions, she can keep each paramour alive for a few centuries, but then each withers away. The story pivots on the attempts of a human doctor to solve Blaylock's dilemma, with the result that her uniqueness is explained not thematically but hematically: Her blood evinces a unique biochemistry that identifies Blaylock as the sole representative of an entirely separate species.

No science-fiction tale of vampires, however, has exerted the influence of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*. After a virulent bacterial pandemic overwhelms the world and turns human into cannibalistic vampires, the one man who remains immune—thanks to a previous inoculating bite

from a vampire bat—struggles to comprehend the nature of the plague as he fends off vampire attack all the while. Because it has been filmed three times—with Vincent Price in *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), with Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man* (1971), and with Will Smith in *I Am Legend* (2007)—the premise sounds familiar today. (It also inspired the *Night of the Living Dead* zombie movies.)

the premise sounds familiar today. (It also inspired the *Night of the Living Dead* zombie movies.) But Matheson's was the first fictional depiction of vampirism as the result of physiological disease, not supernatural forces. It gave an ironic twist to an old pattern: Where vampires once were believed to cause epidemics, here epidemics spawn vampires.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) first popularized the word *nosferatu* as a synonym for "vampire," supposedly gleaning it from Romanian folklore. Though linguists have been unable to trace the word's precise origins, popular etymology has sometimes ascribed it to the Greek *nosophorus*, or "plague carrier."

The one constant in the evolution of the vampire legend has been its close association with disease. Little surprise, then, that medicine in recent decades has stepped forward to offer its own explanations of vampiric origins.

One of the most frequently cited medical causes of vampirism is rabies. In 1998, for example, Spanish neurologist Dr. Juan Gomez-Alonso made a correlation between reports of rabies outbreaks in and around the Balkans—especially a devastating one in dogs, wolves, and other animals that plagued Hungary from 1721 to 1728—and the "vampire epidemics" that erupted shortly thereafter. Wolves and bats, if rabid, have the same snarling, slobbering look about them that folklore ascribed to vampires—as would a human being suffering from rabies.

Various other symptoms reinforce the rabies-vampire link: Dr. Gomez-Alonso found that nearly 25 percent of rabid men have a tendency to bite other people. That almost guarantees transmission, as the virus is carried in saliva. Rabies can even help explain the supposed aversion of vampires to garlic: Infected people display a hypersensitive response to any pronounced olfactory stimulation, which would naturally include the pungent smell of garlic.

Rabies may also harbor the roots of the vampiric fear of mirrors. Strong odors or visual stimuli trigger spasms of the face and vocal muscles of those with rabies, and this in turn induces hoarse groans, bared teeth, and a bloody frothing at the mouth. What rabies sufferer would not shrink from such a reflection? Indeed, Dr. Gomez-Alonso stated, in the past, "a man was not considered rabid if he was able to stand the sight of his own image in a mirror."

Rabies might furnish yet a third explanation—this one for the vampire's nocturnal habits and erotic predations. That's because the disease afflicts the centers of the brain that help regulate sleep cycles and the sex drive—keeping you up all night, quite literally, as some reports suggested that rabies victims had intercourse up to 30 times a night. Before French microbiologist Louis Pasteur discovered a vaccine for rabies in 1885, the ultimate outcome of the disease was mania, dementia, and death.

If rabies doesn't persuade you of vampirism's physiological underpinnings, there is always porphyria, a rare genetic disorder leading to a breakdown in the production of heme—the red pigment in blood. Dr. David Dolphin, a Canadian biochemist and expert in blood proteins, argued this case on talk shows and at scientific conclaves (including the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Science) in the 1980s. Carried by one in about every 200,000 people, porphyria typically lies dormant in the bloodstream. Once it awakens, however, it makes the skin hypersensitive to sunlight, causing lesions so severe they may destroy the sufferer's nose or fingers. Gum tissue wastes away, making teeth appear more prominent—and therefore fanglike. Some porphyria victims may even grow hairier.

It is easy to imagine how such a victim, able to move about only at night, might be taken for a werewolf. Furthermore, whereas heme injections help alleviate symptoms today, Dr. Dolphin speculated that the afflicted individuals in times past might have been driven by instinct to drink blood. If they ingested enough of it, the heme might be absorbed directly into the bloodstream through the stomach wall. And porphyria as an epidemiological rationale for vampirism offers this bonus: Too much garlic is known to destroy the functioning of heme in the liver. So a porphyria victim, believing

much garlic is known to destroy the functioning of hemin in the liver. So a porphyria victim, believing himself prey to a vampire and therefore moved to surround himself with garlic, might by that very action inadvertently trigger the latent porphyria in his own loved ones (the disease runs in families). Once he died, and his relatives sickened in turn, it might look to all the world like the handiwork of vampires—the latter being widely supposed to prey on their next of kin.

Porphyria had its day in the sun before giving way to pellagra. First recognized in 1735, pellagra results from a deficiency of niacin and tryptophan, usually caused by a diet overly dependent on maize, or corn. Corn was planted widely across southern and eastern Europe, where the climate was warm enough for it to flourish. And that's where pellagra became endemic.

One of the disease's early symptoms is hypersensitivity to sunlight. The skin becomes inflamed then turns scaly and parchment-thin (*pelle agra* is Italian for "rough skin"). The breath turns foul, while the tongue thickens and blackens from bleeding sores. Brain neurons degenerate, leading to unpredictable behavior: insomnia, irritability, dementia, and violence. Diarrhea brings on weight loss, refusal of food, and anorexia. Left untreated, pellagra is invariably fatal—and in the few years before dementia leads to death, the anemia caused by gastrointestinal bleeding lends its sufferers an undeniable look of the "living dead."

Pellagra was thus a wasting disease, and the "main reason for identifying a person as a vampire," according to Drs. Jeffery and William Hampl, "was a wasting disease." In a 1997 issue of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, the Hampls suggest a link between the incidence of pellagra in eastern Europe and the flourishing of the vampire legend there. Because most peasant families would likely suffer from similar nutritional deficiencies, at the moment one member died from pellagra, others would doubtless be sickening too. As the surviving relatives wasted away, this dynamic might be taken as evidence of the recently dead's having returned to prey on the living. When corpses were disinterred and examined for signs of vampirism, one telltale sign was said to be a ring of cornmeal around the mouth.

Insightful as they are, such white-jacketed explanations are ultimately unconvincing. Some element seems to have been left out—some aspect that, if not exactly supernatural, still partakes of the terrible.

A STRANGE, BATLIKE FIGURE

Despite the speculations of our scientifically inclined era, few nonfiction works on vampires have had the impact of those written in the 1920s by a mediocrally minded English reverend—Augustus Montague Summers. In his passages, one can almost hear the thundering cadences of the Inquisition itself:

Throughout the whole vast shadowy world of ghosts and demons there is no figure so terrible, no figure so dreaded and abhorred, yet dight [adorned] with such fearful fascination, as the vampire, who is himself neither ghost nor demon, but yet who partakes the dark natures and possesses the mysterious and terrible qualities of both.... Foul are his ravages; gruesome and seemingly barbaric are the ancient and approved methods by which folk must rid themselves of this hideous pest....

Summers (1880–1948) looked nowhere near as fierce as he sounded. Plump and pink, he sported gray curls resembling tresses and was not above applying a touch of makeup to accentuate his hazel eyes. Novelist Anthony Powell borrowed those eyes and lent them to his fictional Canon Paul Fenner in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*: "They were unusual eyes, not only almost unnaturally small but vague

in hearing secret harmonies. They were unusual eyes, not only almost unimpairedly small, but vaguely moist, dreamy, the eyes of a medium. The cherubic side, increased by a long slightly uptilted nose, was a little too good to be true.”

Perhaps so, for Summers was nothing if not a man of contradictions. Growing up in comfortable surroundings near Bristol, he was baptized in the Church of England but was already drifting toward Roman Catholicism by the time he graduated from Trinity College, Oxford. Yet, his earliest poetry was openly and very erotically gay. What’s more, around the age of 20, he quite probably officiated at a black mass—a blasphemous ceremony mocking the Christian mass. He was a member of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. And in 1920, Summers published the first treatise in English on the Marquis de Sade—noting, in his defense, that it was exclusively “for Adult Students of Social Questions.”

Although Summers wore the attire of a Catholic priest, it is unlikely he was ever ordained one. While he was serving a curacy near Bristol, questions had arisen about inappropriate behavior with choirboys. But Summers *had* been ordained a deacon in the Church of England, giving him every right to be addressed as “Reverend”—however irreverent he usually chose to be.

Montague Summers made his first big literary contributions in the study of English Restoration drama—an irreverent corpus if ever there was one, given that late 17th-century plays abounded with naughty situations and double entendres. Summers was an outstanding editor, issuing multivolume editions replete with scholarly appurtenances. He also turned out to be a superb producer and a leading light of London’s Phoenix Theatre. From 1918 to 1923, according to one friend, this “strange, bat-like figure,” dressed like a medieval cleric, cloak and all, was the talk of the London theatergoing world.

Besides the stage, Summers cherished another love: the Gothic novel, that hoary 18th-century genre featuring brave young ladies, evil European noblemen, ghosts, and spooky old castles. He had even written about Jane Austen by the day in the mid-1920s when London publishing company Kegan Paul asked him to produce two volumes on witchcraft to round out its History of Civilization series. Summers quickly churned out *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1926) and *The Geography of Witchcraft* (1928). “I have endeavoured to show the witch as she really was,” he wrote in the first of those works, “an evil liver, a social pest and parasite; the devotee of a loathly and obscene creed; an adept at poisoning, blackmail, and other creeping crimes; a member of a powerful secret organization inimicable to Church and State; a blasphemer in word and deed...battening upon the filth and foulest passions of the age.”

His juvenile dabblings in the occult may have rattled Summers, but here he found his voice. So he was translating the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, or the “Hammer of Witches”—the 15th-century witch hunters’ handbook that was the bible of the Inquisition. When all these outpourings proved remarkably successful, his publisher approached him with another idea: Might he perform encores with tomes on vampires and werewolves? Summers accepted.

“During the year 1927,” recalled his colleague, Father Brocard Sewell, “the striking and sombre figure of the Reverend Montague Summers, in black soutane and cloak, with buckled shoes—à la Louis Quatorze—and shovel hat, could often have been seen entering or leaving the reading room of the British Museum, carrying a large black portfolio bearing on its side a white label showing, in blood-red capitals, the legend, ‘VAMPIRES.’”

The fruits of heaving his portly carcass up and down those august steps were *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* (1928) and *The Vampire in Europe* (1929), two of the most frequently quoted and referenced books in the literature of vampire studies. Even a casual perusal of their pages exhibits the breadth of Summers’s learning and the depth of his scholarship—that is, if paragraph after paragraph of untranslated Latin, German, or French does not prove too annoying. That might be Summers in a mischievous mood; quite likely, however, they betray his haste. Like many authors making a living from their pens, he was a tad overbooked in the 1920s. At times, his vampire chronicles have the feel

from their pens, he was also overlooked in the 1920s. At times, his vampire characters have the feel of anthologies in the making, with his portentous pen bridging the gaps between great chunks of text plucked straight from his sources. And the reverend's professed antipathy to undue color in his narrative—"If a yarn is to be told for the shudder and the thrill, well and good; let the ruddle be thick and slab. But write the rubric without ambiguity that this is high romance to follow"—was a stricture honored more in the breach than in the observance.

What is the modern reader to make of the reverend's conclusion that such things not only *were* but still *are*? That vampires remain an incarnate evil, as real as the buckle on his shoe? "To the feather-fool and lobcock, the pseudo-scientist and materialist," he thundered, "these deeper and obscurer things must, of course, appear a grandam's tale." On the contrary, wrote Summers, they emblemize a "fundamental truth, which, however exaggerated in expression and communication, essentially informs the vampire-tradition." Summers went so far as to suggest that vampires were as active in his day as they had been in the past, and that the public would have occasion to share his view had their attacks not been "carefully hushed up and stifled" by the authorities.

Many of the reverend's acquaintances dismissed this as all part of his act—the persona he adopted before the reading public. It is true that, after completing *The Were-wolf* (1933), Summers turned away from overtly supernatural topics and returned only to cobble together an anthology or two when he needed money. Instead, he concentrated his efforts on his two-volume history of the Gothic novel, *The Gothic Quest*, his last major literary contribution before his death a decade later.

It's possible that Summers genuinely believed his every claim about vampires. That might have been how he projected—or exorcised—his own forbidden impulses. We will never know, for he kept the veil tightly closed. As rare-book scholar Timothy d'Arch Smith once observed of Summers, "We are dealing very likely with a deeply divided personality."

HYSTERICAL HIGHGATE

The long shadow of Montague Summers falls squarely on the incredible story of London's Highgate Cemetery hauntings—a vivid example of the appeal that "true-life" vampire tales continued to exert on the human imagination in the late 20th century.

Once a favorite Victorian burial ground, Highgate Cemetery, which sprawls across a low rise overlooking north London, is a city of the dead that displays the marvelous funerary architecture of the 19th century: elaborate tombs, aspiring statues, pitying angels, pedimented mausoleums, and fantastic Egyptian avenues. By the 1960s, however, Highgate was ceding its dominion to forces both natural and preternatural. Ivy vines were creeping up the headstones, while foxes and badgers were found denning in the graves. Vandals had pushed over monuments, exposing coffins; coffins had lost their lids, exposing skeletons; weeds and wildflowers disguised dangerous sinkholes. So gloomily picturesque was the place that Hammer Studios used the cemetery as a setting for its *Taste the Blood of Dracula* in 1969.

This particular story, however, began two years earlier, in 1967, when two teenage girls were walking home one evening from their nearby convent school. Passing the entrance to Highgate, they saw what they afterward described as graves opening and the dead arising therefrom. One of the girls, Elizabeth Wojdyla, soon reported nightmares in which something evil, something with the snarling visage of a beast but the body of a man, was trying to get in through her bedroom window. Soon other people were spying ghostly figures in and around the cemetery: spectral cyclists, a classic woman in white, and a man in a hat. The most common sighting was a tall, floating figure with burning eyes.

Once the local paper got wind of this, all manner of ghost hunters and thrill seekers descended on Highgate. Among them was Seán Manchester, president of the British Occult Society. This self-styled psychic—an admirer of Montague Summers—eventually became the presiding bishop of something

psychic, an admirer of Montague Summers, eventually became the presiding bishop of something called the British Old Catholic Church. Manchester was convinced that a vampire lay behind the plethora of spectral sightings. Granted permission to examine Elizabeth Wojdyla, he detected symptoms of pernicious anemia—and what looked like two small puncture wounds in her neck. He sprinkled her room with holy water, salt, and garlic, after which her condition improved. Eventually—understandably—Wojdyla left the area.

Meanwhile, Manchester had begun talking to the press. He apparently told them his Vampire Research Society had found evidence that, back in the 18th century, one of the people who owned the house that once stood on Highgate's site was a mysterious gentleman of eastern European extraction who had arrived in London around the time a vampire craze was sweeping the Balkans. Well, perhaps the paper embroidered Manchester's account somewhat, for by the time it surfaced in the February 2, 1970, edition of the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, that 18th-century immigrant had become a King Vampire—a medieval nobleman who once practiced black magic in Romania, was brought to London by coffin, and was buried somewhere in the neighborhood. The activities of modern Satanists, Manchester reportedly claimed, had unintentionally wakened the noble. He must therefore be hunted, staked, beheaded, and burned.

That was just what hip, youthful “swinging London” needed. On Friday the 13th of March 1970, Manchester told a television news team that he intended to perform an exorcism later that night in Highgate. Shortly thereafter, hundreds of revelers looking to make a night of it poured over the cemetery walls and swarmed among the darkened gravestones. Police officers were recalled from leave to stem the influx. Meanwhile, Manchester had managed to enter a tomb to which he had been led by “Lusia”—a sleepwalking young psychic with bite marks on her neck. There he found only empty coffins, which he seeded with garlic. No exorcism that night.

What we are told next comes entirely from Manchester. Later that summer, as Highgate hysteria reached a fever pitch, “Lusia” in a trance led him to one of the grand if crumbling mausoleums in the cemetery. Inside, he found a great coffin and, removing its heavy lid, discovered that it held a vampire, “gorged and stinking with the life blood of others,” its “glazed eyes [staring] horribly, almost mocking me.” A companion dissuaded Manchester from staking the corpse, however, so he contented himself with pronouncing an exorcism and resealing the vault with garlic-impregnated cement. But the vampire's sleep must have been disturbed, for it decamped for the basement of a nearby mansion—the “House of Dracula,” the press gleefully nicknamed it—where, in 1977, the intrepid vampire hunter tracked it down and staked it, reducing it to slime.

This saga, believe it or not, continued until 1982, when Manchester claimed to have driven the final stake through the heart of the last remaining Highgate vampire. “Lusia,” it seems, had died in the interim and was buried in a graveyard nearby. Encountering her in a dream, however, Manchester had realized that “Lusia,” having been bitten by the vampire, was thereby infected herself—and destined to return from the dead. Visiting her grave site one autumn evening, Manchester was not at all surprised to confront what he described as a large, spiderlike creature about the size of a cat. After being dispatched in the time-honored fashion, the spider reverted to the form and figure of “Lusia.” Manchester returned her to her grave.

What you make of this astonishing story may depend on how high your eyebrow is cocked. It has been recounted in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, providing grist for a shelf load of books. It has appeared regularly in television documentaries and soon will be dramatized in a feature film. And in a sign that even vampires are now online, the harrowing happenings of Highgate are frequently—and vigorously—debated on the Web.

The truly mind-boggling thing is that so many of the story's details could have been lifted straight from the pages of *Dracula*: the eastern European nobleman arriving in London by coffin, the vampire trying to enter the bedroom window, the sleepwalking “Lusia” (like the sleepwalking Lucy C

vampire trying to enter the bedroom window, the sleepwalking Lucia (like the sleepwalking Lucy of the novel), and finally the vampire hunters breaking in to tombs (as Van Helsing did with his assistants). Whatever else it might be, this is life imitating art on an epic scale.

PREY IS PREY

It's but a step from playing at vampires to believing you really are one. One night in 1959, when 16-year-old Salvatore Agron went on a killing spree while dressed like Béla Lugosi, he was actually the leader of a Hell's Kitchen, New York City, gang called the Vampires; the stabbings, though of innocent people, were motivated by gang warfare. In 1996, however, when 16-year-old Roderick Ferrell and four accomplices killed the parents of his girlfriend, it was a vampire fantasy run amok. These devotees of the role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* had convened what the press later called a "cult," cemented by cutting themselves with razor blades and drinking one another's blood.

When Ferrell and his fellow "vampires" were arrested, a copy of Anne Rice's *Queen of the Damned* was found in their car. The film version of that book was later implicated in a murder in Scotland, where Allan Menzies, 22, so lost himself in its fictional world that he convinced himself he was a vampire. Menzies killed his best friend, ate part of his skull, and drank some of his blood. In 1998, Joshua Rudiger, 22, certain that he was a 2,000-year-old vampire, slashed the throats of homeless people in San Francisco because, he said, he needed a drink of blood. "Prey is prey," he supposedly told investigators.

Role-playing is one thing, compulsion something else. In 1886, German psychiatrist Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing published his pioneering *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the first compendium of case studies to illustrate the wide range of paraphilias, or what were once called sexual perversities. Case number 32 described a 26-year-old man who experienced an erotic charge from the taste of blood, stemming from a childhood incident in which he had impulsively sucked the blood from a housemaid's cut finger:

From that time on, he sought, in every possible way to see and, where practicable, to taste the fresh blood of females. That of young girls was preferred by him. He spared no pain or expense to obtain this pleasure.

Case number 48 described a young man with scars covering his arms who had sought out Dr. von Krafft-Ebing. It turned out they were incidental to his wife's lovemaking technique: "[H]e first had to make a cut in his arm," Krafft-Ebing reported, and "she would suck the wound and during the act become violently excited sexually." In the good doctor's opinion, this case recalled the "widespread legend of the vampires, the origin of which may perhaps be referred to such sadistic facts."

Might "clinical vampirism," as the compulsion to drink another person's blood has been diagnosed, really explain the origin of the vampire legend? Certainly it describes a syndrome of pathological behaviors easily correlated to that legend. *Vampirism* was once rather widely used to describe activities ranging from the ingestion of blood to cannibalism. These would have to be irresistibly compulsive behaviors, almost ritualized, the discharge of which would afford only temporary relief. That spelled trouble if such compulsions manifested themselves in psychopathic personalities—especially in people who appeared to be functioning perfectly normally.

In 1931, as Americans packed movie palaces to watch Béla Lugosi play Dracula, German audiences were treated to a far darker tale. Fritz Lang's *M* is a film about a serial killer of children, purportedly inspired by a series of horrible crimes that had plagued the dark days of postwar

purportedly inspired by a series of horrific crimes that had plagued the dark days of postwar Germany.

In the mid-1920s, after police in Hanover began dredging human bones from the nearby Leine River, a hunt was undertaken for what the press called the “Vampire of Hanover” or the “Werewolf of Hanover.” Eventually police arrested a petty crook, stool pigeon, and sexual predator named Fritz Haarmann (1879–1925). Under the impulse of what his accomplice called his “wild, sick urges,” Haarmann had picked up at least 27 young men—homosexual prostitutes, runaways, and street urchins—had taken them to his squalid room, and had gnawed through their throats during sex to kill them. He then butchered their remains, cast the offal and bones into the river, and sold the meat and clothes in the city’s various markets. Not surprisingly, after a sensational two-week trial, Haarmann was beheaded in April 1925.

Five years later, it was the turn of the “Vampire of Düsseldorf” to make headlines. In late 1929, numerous bodies of women and girls—slashed and sometimes decapitated by knives and scissors, or bludgeoned by hammers—surfaced with sickening frequency in and around Düsseldorf. Eventually, a lifelong criminal named Peter Kürten (1883–1931) was arrested and charged with the murders. A near man not devoid of feeling, he seemed unable to resist the compulsion toward sexual gratification that he found in the spurting blood of his victims. As he was led to the guillotine, Kürten supposedly asked the prison psychiatrist whether, “after my head has been chopped off, will I still be able to hear, at least for a moment, the sound of my own blood gushing from the stump of my neck?” He hoped that might be “the pleasure to end all pleasures.”

On the other hand, the story of John Haigh (1909–1949), dubbed the “Acid Bath Murderer,” is a bad B movie, complete with drums of sulfuric acid—Haigh’s means of concealing the perfect crime. Haigh killed at least six people (he claimed nine) in or around London and dumped each body into an acid bath. After a day or two, the ghastly concoction had reduced each victim to a sludge that could easily be poured down a manhole. Eventually the police caught him, and found the remains of three human gall bladders and a partial set of dentures in one of the drums. At his trial, the nation was horrified to witness the offhand, even affable manner with which Haigh confessed to having cut his victims’ throats in order to enjoy a revivifying glass of blood. His testimony earned him the inevitable sobriquet of “Vampire of London.” If it was an attempt to cop an insanity plea, the prosecutor saw through it: Haigh, whose primary motive seems to have been the petty one of theft, was hanged in August 1949.

Then there was a deaf-mute laborer named Kuno Hoffman who, in 1972, gained notoriety as the “Vampire of Nuremberg” after he shot a kissing couple one night and lapped up their blood—blood that was much fresher than the blend he habitually imbibed from buried corpses, several dozen of which he had disinterred expressly for that purpose.

An even more stomach-churning case was that of Richard Trenton Chase. The “Vampire of Sacramento,” as he was branded, was a classic paranoid schizophrenic. He not only believed that his pulmonary artery had been stolen, but also was convinced that either UFOs or Nazis were poisoning his soap dish. Chase also showed a compulsion for drinking blood, which precipitated a killing spree. He murdered two infants and two adults—accompanied by disembowelments, the eating of brains, and the quaffing of blood from used yogurt cups—before the police finally caught up with him. Rather than face the electric chair, Chase poisoned himself.

This litany of latter-day vampirism seems inexhaustible indeed. But it may have reached its grisly apogee in 1980, when 23-year-old James Riva, using gold-plated bullets, shot and killed his 74-year-old disabled grandmother. Riva then drank her blood as it spurted from the wounds. He had attacked her, Riva later claimed, because the voice of a vampire had instructed him to do so. Riva further declared that he himself was a 700-year-old vampire who required his grandmother’s blood to survive only to discover that she was too old and dried up to serve that purpose. In 2009 he came un-

survive, only to discover that she was too old and dried up to serve that purpose. In 2009, he came up for parole. It was denied.

Such instances might be multiplied a hundredfold. Yet it is dangerous to ascribe too much to clinical vampirism, if only because the evidence for it gets flimsier the further back in history one searches. On a hilltop near Cachtice in Slovakia, for example, stand the moldering ruins of a castle. We shall never know exactly what happened there, for thick slabs of legend have accreted around an elusive core of fact. But this was once the home of Elizabeth Báthory (1560–1614), whom history has crowned the “Blood Countess.”

The legend is well known: In 1600 or thereabouts, while having her hair combed, Báthory reacted violently to the clumsy brushwork of a maidservant and struck her, bloodying her nose. When a drop of the blood fell on the countess’s hand, the skin beneath it soon turned magically younger. So the 40-year-old widow, anxious to maintain her fabled but fading youth and beauty, instigated a decade of butchery, arranging for upward of 650 virgin girls to be killed and drained to replenish her rejuvenating blood baths.

Much of that may be fabrication, of course. What’s certain is that the King of Hungary presided over the trial of a Countess Báthory, who was convicted on 80 counts of murder. Seventeenth-century rules of evidence being less stringent than those in force today, many of the rumors—of lesbian orgies, of torture, and even of cannibalism—are hard to prove. Crimes occurred, to be sure, yet it is difficult if not impossible to ascertain their true nature and extent (650 victims seems preposterous).

Accusations of witchcraft dominated Báthory’s trial, leading two of her maidservants and her majordomo to be executed in horrific fashion. Báthory was spared their fate because she hailed from a noble family that had long produced rulers of Transylvania; but hers was a Protestant clan in a Catholic kingdom, and her sons-in-law—the ones who brought charges against her in the first place—stood to inherit her estates. Whatever the truth behind the gruesome tales, in 1611, the Blood Countess was walled into a suite of rooms in her castle, never to leave again. Her dark and solitary confinement ended only with her death four years later.

In far too many other instances, by contrast, the sad facts of clinical vampirism are undeniable. Its grisly catalogue of symptoms underscores a point made by Dr. Philip Jaffé, a psychiatrist, and Frank DiCataldo, an expert on juvenile delinquency, in 1994: Clinical vampirism brings together “some of the most shocking pathologic behaviors [ever] observed in humanity.”

But does clinical vampirism help explain the historical origin of vampires, as Dr. von Krafft-Ebing suspected? Or might it be merely a convenient label to affix to the file drawer of case histories? Wherever the truth lies, the dramatic convergence of myth and reality contained in those histories is sufficient goad to seek a better understanding of vampire origins.

BENEATH THE CLAY

“Everything must have a beginning,” Mary Shelley writes in her foreword to *Frankenstein*, “and that beginning must be linked to something that went before.” Anyone seeking the origins of the vampire legend must be prepared to uncover one beginning after another. Because the vampire is found mostly in story—perhaps *only* in story?—he must be tracked, as if down through the levels of an archaeological dig, from one layer of story to another. One must pass from the night world of the present, with its glittering abundance of images, and wend ever downward through the night worlds residing in printed books, or on incunabula, or inscribed on parchment and vellum, or dwelling in generations of folktales whispered in chimney corners, until only the tombs and the bones remain. That might be the ultimate level, the one—as the poet William Butler Yeats put it—where “under heavy loads of trampled clay / Lie bodies of the vampires full of blood; / Their shrouds are bloody and their lips are wet.”

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