

THE HEIR OF DRACULA

1. The Man Who Begged to Die

The appalling event was scheduled to occur in the small and charming Hanoverian village of Hildesheim. A scaffold was to be erected on the tiny square in front of the municipal prison and, there, the head of the terrible Ebenezer Grump, the so-called “Red-Eyed Vampire” who had terrorized Germany and a large part of Europe for over two years, would at last fall. These nightmarish events are still whispered about today.

During those two years, the human monster had wandered the working class neighborhoods of Berlin, Hanover and Hamburg, bloodily taking the lives of more than 60 women and children.

Occasionally, he would take a small “vacation,” traveling further afield to Holland and England, leaving hideous traces of his passage behind. The vile creature killed for the sheer pleasure of watching his victims’ blood flow; his pleasure came from seeing their suffering as they died.

The Berlin Criminal Brigade had mobilized its top operatives in vain; equally in vain it had solicited the assistance of the police forces of Munich, Weimar and Hamburg. All of them had come up empty-handed as the monster continued his bloody exploits, seemingly unconcerned by the all the forces of order that were hunting him.

But then, he made a mistake that proved to be his undoing: he went to London and killed a young woman and her fiancé in Epping Forest, and then, cut the throat of a baby in broad daylight on the football pitch of Peckham Park, while mortally wounding the child’s nanny. These ignoble exploits attracted the attention of the famous detective, Harry Dickson. Just as the hideous fiend was mutilating the body of a barmaid in Commercial Road, Dickson fell on him and broke his jaw with a shot from his revolver.

Even so, the beast was able to escape under the cover of darkness. A feverish pursuit followed through the south of England and across the sea, when the Vampire was able to stowaway on a German cargo ship. It continued through the worst sectors of Hamburg, until finishing in Hildesheim, when Dickson was able, at last, to bring down the horrible Ebenezer Grump.

During his trial, the monster freely admitted to the crimes committed in London. As to the rest, he insisted that the German police had but to solve them, just as the British police had done.

With braggadocio, he stated that he was honored to have been captured by the great Harry Dickson, and not by a “nobody” from the Criminal Brigade. When all was said and done, he was sentenced to having his head chopped off.

The crowd was incensed when, after the trial, a group of medical scientists and anthropologists requested that mercy be shown to Grump, and that instead, he be locked away in an insane asylum for the rest of his natural life.

The powers-that-be were terrified of the public’s reaction if such a thing were to occur, so the doctors’ request was promptly denied, and Grump’s miserable life was turned over to the executioner.

Capital punishment was rare in Germany. The executioner in Saxony still used an axe to carry out his grim task; but in Prussia, the guillotine was used to take the heads of the condemned.

An ancient death-machine that dated back to the days of Napoleon was pulled out of the cellar of a museum in Hanover, cleaned up and serviced, then sent along to the small, picturesque town.

Calm and apparently resigned, Grump awaited the dawn that would see the end of his days in the single cell of the municipal prison, requesting special meals, cigarettes and the newspapers, all of which he claimed were his due as a condemned man.

Grump will be executed in three days time. Please come at once.

*Ziegenmeyer
Prison Warden, Hildesheim*

Harry Dickson crumpled the telegram with an air of discontent. He was quite busy in London; his assistant, Tom Wills, was still suffering the aftereffects of his terrible adventure in the Newcastle mines and was unable to provide him all the help he required.¹

However, the suffering face of the young man was what pushed him to accept the Warden's request.

"A short voyage to the Continent will do you some good, my boy," said Dickson, a bit brusquely.

Tom looked at him with gratitude.

"I don't deny that I would enjoy it, but I don't like stopping work. And the villains in London have made much of that recently."

"I doubt we'll find ourselves unemployed where we're going."

Tom picked up the crumpled telegram.

"Is it just an invitation?"

"I don't think he'd have us travel so far simply for the unique pleasure of watching Grump's head fall."

"Of course not... Do you think there's something more to this 'Red-Eyed Vampire' affair? If I was Harry Dickson, I'd go," the young man said with a mischievous grin.

"And if I was Tom Wills, I'd already be packing my bags so I could go with my Guv," replied Dickson in the same tone.

The detective avoided discussing the case during the journey, but Wills thought that his employer seemed curiously pensive.

When they arrived in Hamburg, and were in Dickson's favorite café, sitting with enormous steins of beer, while the detective puffed on a new Bavarian pipe, his face relaxed a bit and Tom felt brave enough to question him.

"Guv, you seem to be bothered by something."

Dickson looked at him, intrigued.

"What makes you say that, my boy?"

"This morning, while you were dressing, I heard you mutter to yourself twice: 'It's a terrible mistake.'"

"And what did you think I meant by that?"

"Well, from the tone in which you said it, I'd say the fault wasn't yours."

Dickson put out his hand and pinched the boy's ear.

"That's not bad at all. Indeed, they're going to make a serious mistake in cutting off that monster Grump's head."

"I don't understand. Do you want him locked up in the insane asylum?" asked Tom, astonished and indignant.

"Not at all; I'm as eager as anyone to see him die on the gallows, but I would have liked them to wait a little."

"For how many more days?"

"Days? Did I say days? I wasn't that specific; perhaps months, a year, even more... I'm not sure."

"But why?" Tom could not believe what he was hearing.

"Because I have the feeling that the mystery surrounding this business hasn't yet been solved."

"But surely, the death of that monster will end it all."

"It should, but it won't. I surprised Grump just after he'd committed his final crime. He escaped using incredible wiles; in fact, my considered opinion is that he should have escaped me for good. During the chase, he showed a kind of genius, until we got to Hamburg. Once we were here, he turned into a total imbecile and it was easy to grab him in Hildesheim. You could almost say that the thug had suddenly lost all his intelligence as soon as he set foot in Germany."

"And what do you make of that, Guv?"

"That someone with a superior mind was giving Grump instructions in England and that, by returning to Germany, he disobeyed this 'someone,' who withdrew his aid and delivered him into our hands."

"Is there anything in what Grump said that led you to believe that, Guv?"

¹ This refers to the events of No. 73, *Le Monstre Blanc* (The White Beast).

“Not Grump, no, although I thought him shrewd before I met him. But once I did, he struck me as a brute, resigned to whatever happened to him, even going to the gallows. I couldn’t say anything openly, because the Criminal Brigade sees the world only in black and white. However, I discreetly tried to make them understand that they would do well to hold off on the execution.”

“Why? What are you hoping for?”

“That’s a good question, Tom. What do I hope will happen? All I can say is that I’ve just got a kind of vague feeling about it. Could someone really have been directing Grump to commit his crimes? There certainly wasn’t any proof of that, and Grump himself vehemently denied having ever had any accomplices.

“That’s probably why I felt a bit irritated when I received the Warden’s telegram—and was almost tempted to ignore it.

“Now, my boy, you’ll just have to accept that I don’t know anything else and that any further questions are useless.

“Look, there’s a band getting ready to play! I see the music for a piece by Wagner on the piano, let’s just enjoy it.”

It wasn’t until late afternoon of the following day that the two detectives arrived in Hildesheim. The sun’s last rays gave a golden glow to the beautiful facades on the Brunnen-Platz; the townswomen, just as they had always done, were filling enormous, blue ewers with water from the fountain, while their men smoked their huge pipes on the terraces of the cafés and beer halls, surrounded by the haze of smoke and the smell of beer and wine.

“You could almost believe yourself in a different world,” said Tom with a contented sigh. “Everything here is so calm and serene that I can’t help wonder if we didn’t take a wrong turn and wind up in a place where no one is set to lose his head at dawn tomorrow.”

Suddenly, from inside one of the inns, a voice called to them:

“Can it be? Is it really Herr Dickson himself and young Herr Wills who always follows him like his shadow?”

A small, round man with the rosy, smiling face of a cherub waddled towards them and held out his hands in greeting.

“Why, if it isn’t the good Doctor Poppelreiter!” responded Dickson, taking the two outstretched hands warmly in his own. “Just seeing you here tells me that the beer in Hildesheim must be amongst the best in Germany!”

“And in Austria and all the other countries of the world,” finished the little man. “Come and have a drink with me. I imagine such high-class gentlemen are drinking wine? Kellner! Bring us two bottles of Hocheimer and some ice!”

“Have you come to see Grump die?” asked Poppelreiter. “It’s thanks to you, Herr Dickson, that we’ll be finished with that monster for good. And, it’s also thanks to you that the glory of his capture rubbed off on the modest Chief of Police of our little town: your friend and servant, Doctor Poppelreiter!”

Dickson said nothing to disagree with his friend and patiently listened as he went over all the minute details of the infamous trial.

Tom was only half listening, instead enjoying the charming sight of evening casting its blue shadow over the Brunnen-Platz.

“Oh! What a splendid old house,” he suddenly exclaimed, pointing to a house that looked like a lacework made of stone.

Poppelreiter looked to where he was pointing and frowned slightly.

“Frankly, Herr Wills,” he said quietly, “the people around here would prefer it to be smashed to pieces, rather than be admired by visitors.”

“That would be a crime!” exclaimed the young man in surprise.

“From your point of view, perhaps that seems the case, but not from that of my fellow citizens. We call it the ‘Gespenster-Haus,’ the haunted house. And you’ll notice that this part of the Platz is deserted at night. None of the cafés do any business at all as soon as it starts to get dark and it’s all because of that monstrosity of a house.”

“Why does everyone think badly of it?”

“To be honest, it’s all very mysterious. It’s belonged to the same, ancient Transylvanian family for 200 years. They take care of the necessary repairs and they’ve even furnished it comfortably. But no one has lived in it all that time! Once a week, the notary who is paid to look after it comes with two servants who take care of cleaning it, and they rush off as soon as they’re done. Everyone says that the owner, Count Dragomin, leaves it ready for the ghosts to use.

“They’ve never been interested in renting it out or selling it. As magistrate, I dislike them doing something that so upsets the people here.”

Harry Dickson looked at his timepiece and stood up.

“My dear Poppelreiter, I hope that you’ll excuse us, but we’re going to take a look around town before paying a courtesy call on Warden Ziegenmeyer.”

“Of course! I’ll see you tomorrow, although it will be under far less pleasant circumstances.”

Fifteen minutes later, the detective and his assistant were being announced to the Director of the Municipal Prison.

For a bureaucrat who was only used to dealing with minor criminals, the responsibility of watching over the Red-Eyed Vampire and getting him safely to the executioner’s scaffold had been a major worry.

That was Tom Wills’ first impression as they were approached by a man with a gray complexion, his features drawn and large dark circles under his eyes. Clearly, this was the product of many a sleepless night.

“Good evening, Warden,” said Dickson, cutting short a pompous speech of welcome. “I don’t suppose it’s to either praise me, nor simply a desire for me to witness an execution, that you’ve called me to the continent.”

“It is certainly not, Herr Dickson!”

Herr Ziegenmeyer hesitated several seconds, then went to the door, looked out to be sure no one was listening, and, with a mysterious air, returned towards his visitors.

“Herr Dickson,” he asked, “do you believe that Grump is insane?”

“Not for a second.”

The Warden nodded his head in agreement.

“That’s what I think as well. I’ve never met anyone as clear-headed as that vile, brutish creature. But for the last few days, he’s been acting in the most incomprehensible, bizarre fashion and I no longer know what to think.

“My duty should have been to alert my superiors. But I was afraid I’d be rebuffed and that they’d dismiss my concerns as foolishness. In my business, more than in most others, being ridiculed means the end of you.”

Nodding his head, the detective made it clear that he understood completely.

“Well, Herr Dickson, for the last few days, Ebenezer Grump has been afraid!”

“He has a good reason,” interrupted Tom. “He’s about to die.”

“But not at all! It’s just the opposite! He’s afraid that he won’t be sent to the guillotine!”

“Perhaps, it’s just that he prefers a rapid death, rather than a slow, agonizing one inside a lunatic asylum,” suggested Tom.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Herr Wills, because Grump, who has a good life here, and who seems to have adapted quite well to the special conditions accorded those condemned to death, begs that his execution not be put off any longer.

“His guards have heard him muttering over and over, ‘It would be horrible! I must be dead before he gets here!’ ”

“Have you asked him about it?” Dickson wanted to know.

“Of course, but all he does shake his head and look terrified. The night before I sent you that telegram, he asked to see me.

“I’ve never seen a man look more overwhelmed by fear. He said, ‘I want someone to bring me wild garlic flowers right away!’

“I shrugged my shoulders and answered, ‘That’s just a whim, Grump, and I have no idea where we’d find such a thing.’

“He responded excitedly, ‘They’re in the woods outside of town! I’m begging you, Warden; I need them before the night is out! If I don’t get them, it will be horrible! Despite what I’ve done, I don’t deserve this!’

"I was going to refuse his demand, when suddenly he whispered, 'Get Dickson to come! I have something to tell him... It's not a lot, but it would be worth his while. For the love of God, please get me those garlic flowers!'"

Dickson's expression had become so somber and worried that the warden suddenly stopped his recitation with an astonished air.

"I hope you found him those garlic flowers," said the detective, almost aggressively.

"Well, after that, I could hardly refuse..."

"Thank God," said Dickson.

"Good lord! You seem to understand something about this madness, Herr Dickson."

"Madness? Not in the least. I could even say that this shines a new light on everything."

"Herr Ziegenmeyer, I would bet that something else strange, incomprehensible even, happened during the night following Grump's demand."

The Warden leapt from his chair, his mouth open, eyes round, the perfect picture of astonishment.

"How did you know that, Herr Dickson? I insisted that my employees remain completely silent, and they are all extremely loyal and responsible."

"No one told me, but everything you've said made me believe it. Someone undoubtedly tried to enter the condemned man's cell!"

"That's it! And in the most astonishing way! In the middle of the night, the guard who was sleeping in the prisoner's cell was woken up by an odd noise."

"To his horror, he saw a giant shadow on the wall. He turned towards the window and saw an indistinct form blocking the moonlight."

"He jumped up, but immediately saw the most hideous face pressing itself against the iron bars; he threw himself back, terrified. Just then, Grump woke up. He also saw the monstrous apparition. That's when the guard saw him grab the garlic flowers and rush towards the window."

"The thing that was there had barely seen the flowers before it began to scream so horribly that the entire prison was woken up. Then, it disappeared."

"Alerted, I organized an immediate search. The window of Grump's cell is 10 meters above the ground. There was no trace of a ladder or rope, but near the road, we found some drops of blood."

"What were we to make of it all? When we asked him, Grump would only say, 'He came! My God! I hope they take my head quickly!'"

"Get me a good lantern and a ladder," ordered Dickson.

Once in the courtyard, the detective began to carefully examine the walls by the light of the lantern.

"Two daggers were enough," he finally muttered, "but still, he must have been good climber."

"What are you saying, Herr Dickson?" asked the Warden.

"Just that with the help of two strong daggers pushed into the mortar of the walls, the night creature was able to scale the outer wall, then this one as well. It was an extraordinary feat!"

"But, tell me..." began the Warden.

"There's nothing else I can tell you, Warden. Take me to see Grump."

The murderer was stretched out on his cot, eyes wide open, staring at the weak lamp that barely lit his cell. He immediately recognized Dickson, and his ugly face with its broken chin, twisted into a semblance of a smile.

"They're chopping off my noggin' tomorrow, Herr Dickson," he said. "I'm really glad that you're here! And that's no lie!"

"Why is that, Grump?"

The man made an odd grimace.

"Tomorrow, at the foot of the gallows, when I'm certain I'm about to die, I'll tell you everything."

"Why not tell me now?"

"No! There's still tonight to get through, and a lot of things can happen during a whole night! On my eternal soul, I swear to you, Herr Dickson, I'll tell you everything I've got to say, but on the condition that my death is certain."

"This man is insane," muttered the Warden.

"No!" replied Dickson firmly. "*He is completely sane!*"

The detective remained silent, deep in thought, for several minutes before saying,

“Give me some of your garlic flowers, Grump.”

The condemned prisoner laughed joyfully.

“At last, you understand! Here they are, Herr Dickson... But, now you have to promise me something...”

“What’s that?”

“*Promise me that I will be guillotined tomorrow!*”

Dickson considered this request in silence.

“I promise,” he finally said, slowly.

“God bless you, Herr Dickson,” whispered Grump as Dickson walked away.

“What do you think of all that?” stammered the Warden once they were back in his office. “It’s not at all... regular!”

“Well put, Warden. I’m glad you called me, and I think that your superiors will be too, later on. If I succeed—and I have to succeed—there will be a promotion in all this for you, sir, and a big one!”

“If you say so, Herr Dickson,” responded the Warden, his face lighting up. “If you say so, I’ll just have to believe you...”