

Chronicles of Brunonia

The Vampire Disease

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At the turn of the century, a deadly disease swept Europe and the Eastern United States. In the span of four years, George Brown, a farmer in rural Rhode Island, lost his wife and two daughters to the disease. Faced with the prospect of losing his only son, George is convinced to seek and destroy the alleged vampire responsible for these deaths....

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Two prayers floated upwards toward heaven as a dozen shovels scraped closer and closer to the three corpses resting beneath the frozen ground. “God have mercy on these country folk and their superstitions,” thought Dr. Harold Metcalf, the Medical Examiner for Exeter, Rhode Island. He clutched his leather bag closer to his body as the stinging March wind whipped between the short gravestones of the cemetery. Flecks of dirt rained down on him as he watched the gravediggers deepen the trenches. Meanwhile, George T. Brown, a local farmer, prayed:

“Lord, if it be true that my wife or daughters is a vampire, may the destruction of her heart save my son.”

In the four years leading up to that blustery March evening in 1892, George lost each of the three women in his family to consumption, or tuberculosis, and it became increasingly clear that he would soon lose his son to the same terrifying disease. The nightmare began when his wife, Mary, developed a hollow, persistent cough. Within weeks, her coughs brought forth sputum, the greenish-yellow mixture of mucus and saliva from the depths of her diseased lungs. Soon, her coughs sprayed streaks of blood into her handkerchief. At first, the hemorrhaging could be measured in teaspoons; later, it could be measured in cups. As her body wasted away, her face became ruddy, then pale. In her final weeks, a feverish flush came over her hollow cheeks. Her lungs wheezed and her ribs heaved as she gasped for each breath until finally, she died.

Roughly six years before Mary Brown’s death on December 8, 1888, Robert Koch, the German physicist and scientist, presented his discovery of *Mycobacterium Tuberculosis* to a stunned audience at the University of Berlin’s

Physiological Institute. He brought his entire laboratory to the lecture hall: over 200 test tubes, microscope slides, and glass jars filled with tissue samples filled the small demonstration table before him. After the lecture, his audience gave no applause. They silently walked up to the table to see the magnificent and deadly bacteria for themselves. In the nineteenth century, it is estimated that the entire European population carried the tuberculosis germ, though only a fraction actually developed the disease. In the United States, the disease not only killed George Brown's wife and two daughters but also accounted for one in four deaths in the Eastern United States.

In 1889, the National Tuberculosis Association accepted the idea that consumption was preventable. They attempted to educate the general public about the dangers of bad food, impure air and dirty drinking water. The novelty of these seemingly common-sense suggestions indicates how little people at the turn of the century knew about the disease. Had George Brown known that tuberculosis usually spreads by inhaling airborne droplets of disease-infested, coughed-up sputum, perhaps his daughters would have avoided spending hours at their dying mother's bedside. If George had known that the strength of one's inherited immune system greatly influenced the probability of contracting consumption, perhaps he would have ultimately resisted exhuming the bodies of his wife and daughters. But science in 1892 had not advanced far enough to explain why the disease consumed George's family one by one. Whispers of supernatural beings traveled more quickly through the rustling foliage of the forests than scientific findings from Europe. For the citizens of rural Rhode

Island, the idea that a vampire spirit caused this violent illness seemed just as tangible and plausible as theories of microscopic organisms.

Vampire myths of various forms date back to the ancient age. From Japan to Jamaica, many cultures throughout time and geography have held beliefs that blood-sucking, evil spirits inhabited the space between man and god. The most well-known of these traditions, that of eighteenth century Hungary and Serbia, asserted that the vampire was an animated corpse that rose from his grave to suck the blood of his living relatives. The specific belief that vampires caused consumption, however, was a uniquely rural New England phenomenon, and it is uncertain how this Eastern European myth spread to southern Rhode Island in the first place. Perhaps the belief spread from a Benedictine Monk's treatise on vampires—an original copy of this document rests in the Boston Athenaeum—or it is possible that German mercenaries who fought in the Revolutionary War transplanted their motherland mythologies as they settled new roots in America.

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The local mason barely finished setting the words “Yes dear mother, thou art gone, come from this world of pain and sin...” into Mary Brown's gravestone when the eldest Brown daughter, Mary Olive, came down with tuberculosis. Like her mother, her body grew frail and her cheeks rosy before she was finally laid to rest in the graveyard of Chestnut Hill Baptist Church. Again, the mason carved an inscription into a gray marble headstone: “Sister thou art gone to rest, we will not weep for thee...”

Around the time when the Brown family dug the grassy plot directly behind Mary's grave for Mary Olive, George's only son Edwin began developing

the telltale signs of consumption—a persistent, productive cough and a flushed face. Desperate to avoid adding another stone to the Chestnut Hill graveyard, George sent Eddie and his wife to Colorado Springs in hopes that the fresh air would restore his health. When Eddie went west, his youngest sister, nineteen-year-old Mercy Lena, was in good health. Within a few months of his departure, however, Mercy too came down with the disease. She died on January 17, 1892 while Eddie was still in retreat. Perhaps George was unprepared for her sudden death. Maybe he could not bear to design yet another burial marker, or perhaps he simply could not afford a more elaborate gravestone. In stark contrast to the poetry etched into her sister and mother’s gravestones, Mercy’s marker simply reads “Mercy L. Daughter of George T. and Mary E. Brown. Died Jan. 17, 1892. Age 19 Years.”

Eighteen months in the Colorado Mountains had little influence on the progress of Eddie’s disease. His lungs burned from the continual coughing, and his cheeks developed the signature crimson glow that signaled his impending death. He and his wife decided to return to Rhode Island and live out his final days with her parents.

The frequency with which death struck the Brown household did not numb George’s grief. If anything, George grew increasingly desperate to save his remaining child. The whispers of superstitious neighbors grew louder like the summer buzz of cicadas, and soon their words became clearer. “A vampire spirit inhabits the body of your dead wife or daughters,” whispered the neighbors. “She rises from the grave and feeds upon the blood of her closest kin to maintain the life of her corpse!” they cried, “you must find the body the spirit haunts! Remove

and cremate the heart and have your son consume the ashes. Only then can you save his life!”

“Nonsense,” George replied. “I’m no doctor, but I cannot believe that the death of my family is the result of a vampire spirit. Away with your superstitions!” Yet each time George turned his neighbors from the door, he couldn’t help but wonder. *Why had the disease chosen his family? Could it be that the forces of evil sent this tragedy upon him? Had he not tried to live the simple life of an honest farmer? Were the rumors true? Could he save his son?*

Though the relationship between tuberculosis and vampirism was a New England belief, the idea that consuming the ashes of the vampire’s heart could prevent death was not a far cry from existing ideas about vampires. In Serbia, people believed that eating the earth of the vampire’s grave or rubbing the diseased in his blood would bring relief. Some in the Turkish provinces and Greek islands believed that burning the vampire’s body and scattering his ashes to the wind would bring about his destruction. A few older traditions claim that the souls of the dead will not lay to rest unless the entire body is consumed. The idea that the restless souls of the dead can inhabit the corpse or grave is a widespread tradition.

The day George Brown finally gave into the townspeople’s superstitions, they immediately sent a boy to County Medical Examiner Dr. Harold Metcalf’s home in neighboring Wickford. Leaning one hand against the cedar siding of Dr. Metcalf’s house while clutching his aching side with the other, the boy panted, “The people of Exeter request you to examine the corpses of three alleged vampires in Chestnut Hill Baptist cemetery.”

“Absurd!” the Doctor retorted, sending the boy back down the road. Dr. Metcalf’s experiences working in the hospital aid wagons of New York showed him that medical science—not superstition—provided the correct explanation of every illness. Yet the doctor eventually went to Exeter with the purpose of examining the exhumed bodies. He had cared for Mercy Brown during her final illness, and he may have felt sympathetic for George Brown. It is also possible that he saw a teaching opportunity in the moment—perhaps he could, once and for all, dispel these ridiculous beliefs about evil spirits inhabiting the bodies of the dead.

The sun stretched its last rays across the deep purple sky before disappearing beyond the horizon. Dr. Metcalf, George Brown, and a dozen gravediggers trudged down the short, gravel path to the Brown family gravesite. The flickering torchlight cast eerie shadows across the cold, stone monuments. George felt a shiver creep down his spine, although he felt no wind while standing over his wife’s grave. The twelve men who accompanied him and the doctor were all neighbors. While thankful that he had been spared the gruesome task of unearthing his loved ones himself, George felt that his friends seemed overly-eager to volunteer for the job. “The one who’s a vampire will still have blood in her heart,” one whispered, and George gave a half-hearted nod without looking up from the white gravel path.

The scrape of the shovels and grunts of the gravediggers finally ceased as the last coffin was lifted from its grave and dropped with a thud on the grass beside the rectangular holes. A pile of dirt-covered suspenders laid to one side—they made the digging more tedious. The men panted heavily and passed a flask

of whiskey back and forth. When one man offered the glittering flask to the doctor, he simply shook his head. He had work to do.

The smell of rotten corpse wafted across the graveyard as they lifted the rough pine lid of Mary's coffin. Her skeleton still had bits of rotten flesh and muscle fibers attached to the bones, but her decomposing heart contained no blood. The sight of her exhumed corpse made George's stomach curl, and he tacitly apologized to his late wife as they replaced the lid of her coffin.

Next, they pried the top off Mary Olive's coffin. Nothing remained in her casket but a cross-armed skeleton and a large tuft of hair. The men quickly closed the casket and gently lowered it into its original resting place.

Finally, they opened Mercy's coffin. The splintery lid creaked as it swung open. Her body maintained its flesh and consumptive coloring. Her pale skin and crimson cheeks glowed eerily in the flickering torchlight. A gust of wind spread the overpowering odor of decaying flesh across the men, and they jumped back from the body, covering their noses with handkerchiefs. The doctor pushed them aside and removed his knife. "She's only been buried for two months," he shouted over the howling wind. "This is not abnormal. Also, the winter cold will preserve her body better!" He sensed that nobody listened. His knife pieced the skin over Mercy's heart, and sliced a clean slit through her chest with ease. The ribs on her left side cracked as he dug deeper for her organs. He reached in and pulled out her heart. Strands of rotten flesh clung to the surface. The men watched as he sliced open the heart, and they erupted in a mob of shouts as a drop of clotted, decomposed blood fell to the ground.

“This is normal for...” the doctor yelled over the mob, but his efforts were in vain. Two men rushed to find tinder and kindling. Dr. Metcalf sighed and shook his head as the men frantically piled the tinder in a circle, setting the larger pieces of wood in a teepee around it. They lit the fire and threw in the heart. Some men claimed they heard it faintly scream as it sizzled and crackled to dust. When the final embers of the fire fizzled to gray, they scooped the ashes into a jar and handed them to George. A sense of accomplishment filled the air. George’s son would be saved.

George dissolved the ashes in a bowl of medicine and brought it to Edwin. He gagged down the mucky mixture of liquid and cremated corpse, and burst into a fit of coughing. Over the weeks, his health showed no progress. Exactly one and a half months after his sister’s body was exhumed, he died on May 2, 1892. Another stone appeared in the Brown family plot. *He giveth his beloved sleep* it read in simple script. George Brown’s family would never be disturbed from their eternal slumber again.

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