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Opening extract from

Young Dracula

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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For Megan Larkin,
my greatest critic

First published in 2002 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

This edition first published 2014

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-355-3

Printed in China by Leo

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Chapter 1
Wilfred the Bold

I'm sure you've heard of Count Dracula, the evil vampire who could turn himself into a bat at will. The creepy fellow who always dressed in black and preferred a neck of warm blood to a mug of milky tea any day.

Yes, everyone's heard of Count Dracula. But how many of us know what he was like when young? Before he grew tall, swept

his hair back, and started hanging round graveyards? Not many of us! And why? Because until now, the story of young Dracula has been a well-kept secret – a secret that I (a very nosy writer) have at last unearthed.

But before I tell you this secret story, you must learn something of life at Castle Dracula before the lad was born. Pay attention now. This bit's important.

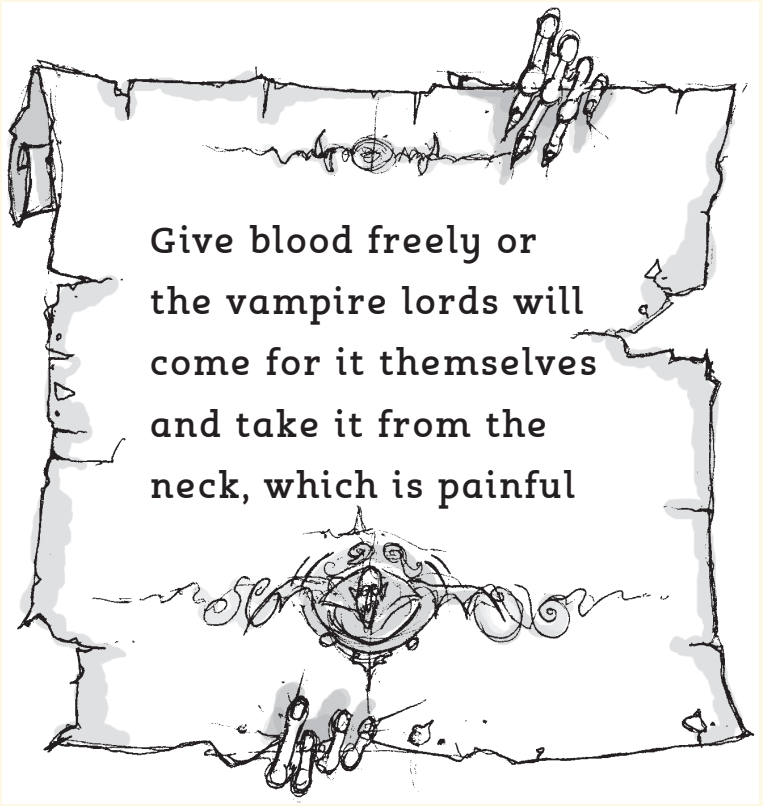
Once, in a remote corner of Transylvania, there were two rival vampires. One was Count Dracula, the other was Baron Gertler. The Count and the Baron lived in tall, black castles on opposite sides of the valley.

Far below, between the two castles, there was a village.

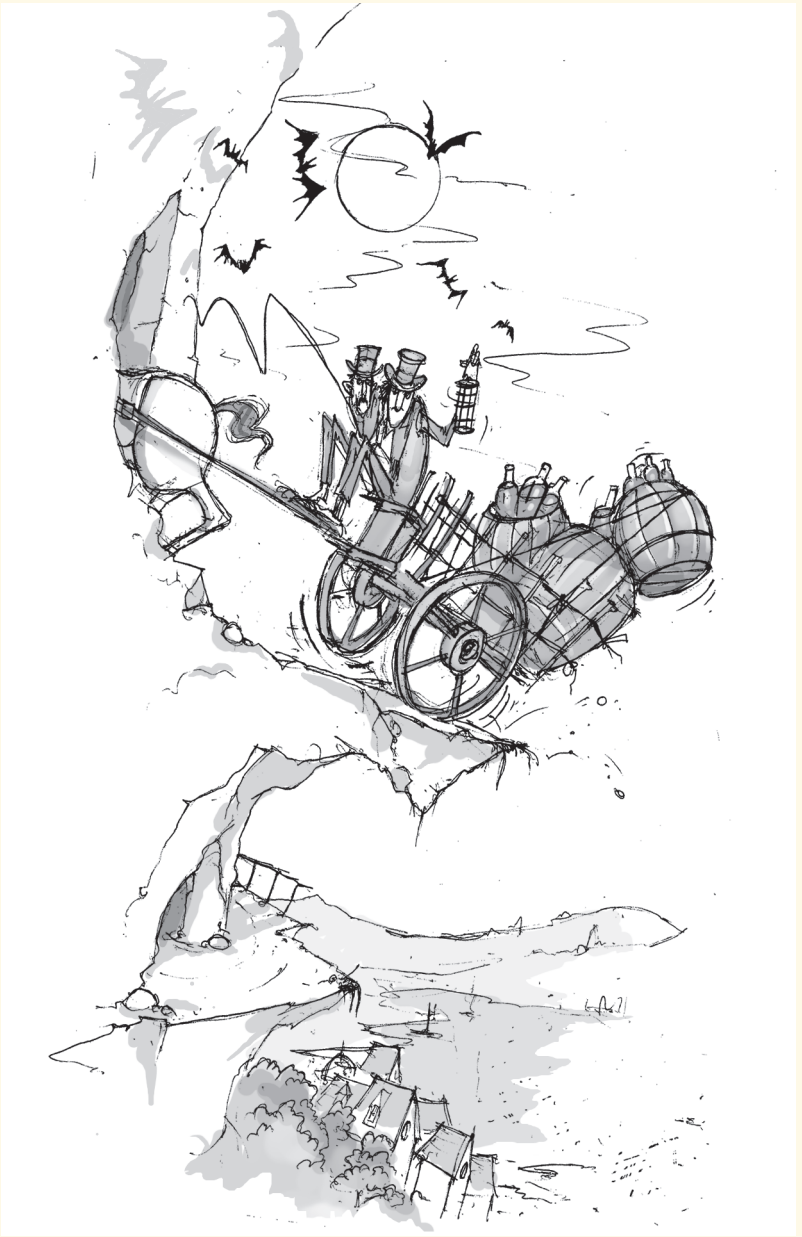
Every night, very late, village bloodmen (the Transylvanian version of milkmen) rode up to the castles with bottles of fresh blood



for the Count and the Baron. The bloodmen collected a cup of blood from everyone in the village between the ages of 10 and 80. The villagers had no choice in this. It was a very old law.



Now, for a long time, Count Dracula and Baron Gertler were the last of their line.



Neither of them had children to follow in their bloody footsteps. But one year, the Count brought home a wife. And the following year, Countess Dracula gave birth to a son. They called him Wilfred.

When Baron Gertler heard that the Draculas had an heir, he became very jealous. He turned himself into a giant bat, flew to the castle across the valley, and snatched the babe from his mother's arms while the Count was clipping his toenails in the bath. Then he flew off with the child under his arm.

The distressed Countess rushed to the window to save her darling son, but as she reached for him, she leaned out too far and tumbled to her death far below. Her scream brought the Count dripping from the bath.

As soon as he saw what had happened, the Count ground his vampire teeth with rage, turned himself into a bat, and flew after the



Baron. The Baron escaped, but the Count saved baby Wilfred and brought him home.

Some nights later, the Count sneaked into Castle Gertler before the Baron was up, and hammered a wooden stake through the Baron's mean old heart.

Twelve years passed. Count Dracula was now half the vampire he had been. He was lame and could no longer turn himself into a bat. He never went out at night. The villagers no longer feared him, and the bloodmen no longer delivered. He had to content himself with the blood of the rats that scampered around the castle.

One dark and miserable midnight, the old Count sat and gazed out from his high tower. On the hill across the valley stood the crumbling ruin of Castle Gertler. No one had lived there since the Baron's death.

"Ah, those were the nights," the Count said, with a tear in his eye.

He missed having a real enemy. He missed being young and fit enough to go out for a neck or two of human blood when the fancy took him. There wasn't even anyone to talk to. No one that mattered anyway. It was no use talking to Wilfred. They had nothing in common, nothing at all.

"Are you all right, Father?"

The Count jumped. He hadn't heard Wilfred come up the stairs. "Oh, it's you," he snapped. "What do you want?"

Wilfred was worried about the old vampire. He was a kind and sensitive lad.

"I was wondering if you'd like a bowl of toad and tomato soup, Father."