

Miss Massingberd and the Vampire



Tina Rath

Tina Rath sold her first dark fantasy story to Catholic Fireside in 1974. Since then her short fiction has appeared in both the small and mainstream press, including Ghosts & Scholars, All Hallows, Woman's Realm, Bella and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. She has been anthologized in The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories, The Fontana Book of Horror Stories, Midnight Never Comes, Seriously Comic Fantasy and Karl Edward Wagner's The Year's Best Horror Stories: XV. With her husband Tony she has co-written stories for Mike Ashley's Royal Whodunnits and Shakespearean Detectives, and together they run ParLOUR Voices, a live reading/performance group.

"While I was finishing my thesis on The Vampire in Popular Fiction," explains Dr Rath, who recently received her degree from the London University, "I came to the conclusion that the vampire's cloak is an extraordinarily versatile costume: it can be worn by men or women; it can conceal and disguise, but paradoxically it can also be used for display; it can suggest the cowed monk, or the sophisticated opera-goer; it can itself be concealed, rolled up and carried unobtrusively, but as soon as it is put on it transforms the wearer.

"The vampire, which is both male and female, terrifying and alluring, similarly offers the ultimate disguise, fancy

dress, fantasy — a persona that we can slip on either to hide or parade; a unisex, one-size fits all masquerade. The cloak is an ink-blot test, in which we can see our obsessions, not only our fears but also our desires — for sexual potency, freedom from the restraints of gender, morality and the entire material world.

"And of course, it's not real, so when we have enjoyed our fantasy we can discard the cloak and be human again. It is hardly surprising that the vampire has an immortal appeal."

About "Miss Massingberd and the Vampire", Rath reveals: "I wrote this particular story because I live near a very beautiful, ivy-covered churchyard, which actually does have a path running through it. It was crying out for a vampire, so I gave it one."

Miss Massingberd first heard about the vampire from her fifth-formers. They were quite the silliest girls in the school, and she paid very little attention to them. Of course, she delivered her little lecture about going straight home from school, and walking in a brisk and ladylike way.

"And then no one will bother you. Human or vampire," she concluded, and confiscated all the pieces of garlic, and crosses made from broken rulers and Sellotape which seemed to have found their way into most desks in the classroom.

Now Miss Massingberd's own quickest route to school and back lay through St Elphege's churchyard. In the mornings there was no problem, but sometimes, at night, when she had been kept late by a parents' meeting, or a committee, or rehearsals for the school play, she might go the long way round. However, she was a strong-minded woman, and scorned superstitious fears. You did not, she told herself, become Head of English at the biggest comprehensive school in her area of London by allowing yourself to be easily frightened. So on that luminous autumn evening when she met the vampire herself she was taking her short cut. And she was not walking briskly either, but loitering like the silliest of her fifth-formers; breathing in the scent of burning leaves from a hidden bonfire and enjoying that strange nostalgia for a past she had never actually experienced that she always felt in

autumn, when she saw the dark cloaked figure standing among the headstones.

At first she naturally supposed it was the vicar and she was passing him with a polite "Good evening", when he turned to look at her. He was quite unmistakably a vampire. The points of his canine teeth were just visible on his lower lip. And he was tall, and dark, and heartbreakingly handsome. Miss Massingberd looked at him and fell helplessly in love.

She was so taken aback by the sensation (she had never even thought of such a thing before in her life) that she stood quite still, gazing into the vampire's dark and haunted eyes. And the vampire gazed back at Miss Massingberd. It is difficult to know what might have happened if the real vicar had not ridden past them on his bicycle, calling a cheerful greeting. The vampire's eyes flashed ruby red in the light of the bicycle lamp, and he vanished into the dusk. Miss Massingberd was left, shocked and shivering, and feeling as if she had suddenly awakened out of a deep sleep.

But she could not say if she had been roused from a dream or a nightmare.

The vicar, seeing her standing looking so lost in the dusk, wheeled his bicycle around with a swish of gravel and asked her to come in for a cup of tea. He was new in the parish, and unmarried, so he was always glad to see visitors, and he knew Miss Massingberd well by sight, as vicars and schoolmistresses often sit on the same committees. Miss Massingberd was too flustered by her encounter with the vampire to refuse, and she followed him into his horrible late Victorian vicarage which seemed to have been designed for a polygamist with an unusually large extended family.

"I call it the barracks," the vicar shouted cheerfully across the echoing spaces of the entrance hall. It was paved with tiles depicting the sacrifice of Jephtha's daughter, Miss Massingberd noticed, averting her eyes hastily. "Just chuck your coat on the hallstand."

He led her into a parlour so large that the corners of the high ceiling were lost in the dimness beyond the power of a single sixty-watt bulb to dispel. The vicar lit the gas fire and recommended Miss Massingberd to sit close to it.

"It's always freezing in here," he said, "and it's worse upstairs. If you don't mind hanging on here for a moment I'll go and rustle up some tea."

Miss Massingberd sat, staring into the dark corners of the room, wondering how she came to be having tea with the vicar, instead of going home to do her marking. It was the vampire's fault, of course, but she could not blame him. Her thoughts drifted away, to moonlight, and ruined towers, and fiery eyes, becoming more and more unsuitable for a schoolmistress every moment. When the vicar came back with his tray he was surprised to see how flushed and pretty she looked in the dim light.

"Only Indian tea, I'm afraid," he said, wishing suddenly that he had something more exotic to offer her, "but there's some rather good cake."

Miss Massingberd withdrew her gaze from the darkness and smiled at the vicar. She thought she was giving him her bright, efficient, friendly, committee smile. She had no way of knowing that it was now the rapt, mysterious smile of a woman who has fallen in love with a vampire, and the vicar was taken aback. He had never realized, in all those committee meetings, how blue Miss Massingberd's eyes were, and how bright her hair. He smiled too, and fought a ridiculous and unclerical impulse to put a finger very lightly on one of those tiny coils of hair at the nape of her neck which had sprung from her severely rolled French pleat. Instead he concentrated on cutting her a piece of cake.

He started to talk sensibly about their committee, and asked Miss Massingberd her feelings on the Christmas bazaar, but Miss Massingberd simply crumbled the cake on her plate and smiled like Mona Lisa. It was not really very long before his stream of cheerful commonplace things to say began to run dry and he said, almost accusingly, "You're not eating your cake."

Miss Massingberd murmured that she was not very hungry. So the vicar, always a polite host, stood up to take the plate out of her way. Miss Massingberd, recalled to her proper social role, stood up too and smiled again and the vicar, lost and drowning in her blue eyes, kissed her.

And Miss Massingberd, having learned the trick of it, fell in love all over again.

She and the vicar were married, of course. They turned the dreadful, echoing barracks of a vicarage into a hostel for homeless families. And what with that, and the Youth Club and the Brownies and all the other parish duties, they never seemed to have a moment even to think.

Only sometimes, in the long green dusks of spring, or the short red twilights of autumn, Miss Massingberd would walk alone in the churchyard for a while. She would come back looking greatly refreshed, if a little pale, and wind a silk scarf around her throat before going to the Youth Club, or the Brownie meeting, or the Parish Council. And her husband would sigh a little, and remind her to take her iron tonic.