

THE SULTAN, THE VAMPYR AND THE SOOTHSAYER

The
SULTAN,
the
VAMPYR
and the
SOOTHSAYER

LUCILLE TURNER

WINNER OF THE HISLIBRIS PRIZE FOR HISTORICAL
FICTION

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For we wrestle not against flesh and blood
But against principalities, against powers
Against the rulers of the darkness of this world
Ephesians 6:12

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Places of Note in
*The Sultan, the Vampyr
and the Soothsayer*

HISTORICAL NOTE



The country of Wallachia was situated on the shores of the Black Sea south of Transylvania and north of Bulgaria, with Serbia to the west, the River Danube to the south and the Carpathian mountains running through the middle. Now part of Romania, in the fifteenth century Wallachia occupied an important strategic position as a buffer between the Ottoman Empire and Western Christendom. It had been ruled by the Basarab dynasty, the ancestors of the Draculesti family, for five generations and was one of the few Balkan countries to significantly resist the military drive of the Muslim armies.

The Osman family, known to us as the Ottomans, had risen to power after fleeing the Mongols and settling in Western Anatolia in the thirteenth century. A period of expansion then began; once the Ottoman sultanate had acquired Northern Anatolia and most of Greece, it continued to expand south and north to encompass present-day Turkey and Bulgaria. By 1440 it had all but surrounded Constantinople, the capital of the Greek world. To counter Ottoman gains, Hungary, which was under the control of the Catholic Holy Roman Empire,

annexed Transylvania and began to exert pressure on its neighbour Wallachia. Much of the Balkans had already converted to the Islamic faith, but Wallachia had so far remained true to its Old Roman heritage, speaking even today a language that is almost entirely Latin in origin. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Catholic Hungary, the loyalties of Wallachia and its rulers were dangerously split.

As a Latin-speaking, mostly Greek Orthodox country under the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Wallachia embodied the unity of old Christendom: Roman and Greek. But this unity had been under threat since the beginnings of the Great Schism, when the Eastern Orthodox Church became detached from the Roman. With Constantinople under threat from the Ottoman Empire, Christendom was set to tear itself in two, severing the ancient apostolic ties that held it together. At the centre of this wound of two Churches and two worlds, Greek and Roman, the Draculesti family lay like a cross.

The division between Eastern and Western Christendom goes back a long way, and cannot simply be attributed to one particular event or divergence in theology. It was set in motion by the Barbarian invasions of the West during the fifth century, which divided the Western Latin world from the Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean, slowly splitting the Christian Church into two parts.

For much of the first millennium, the Roman Pope had ruled Western Christendom like a monarchy, while the Eastern Orthodox world had a more egalitarian, inclusive approach to theology. From this divergence other disagreements arose, which were more the symptoms of the split than the cause of it. When the Christian Crusades began in the eleventh century, the divide between the two Churches was

brought into the public domain and amplified. The Crusaders came from the West to take back the holy lands that had been lost to the Turks. In their path, the great Greek metropolis was certainly a temptation too strong to resist. When the crusading armies turned on Constantinople in 1204 and sacked the city, pillaging and slaughtering as they went, the curtain fell forever on the unity of Christendom. There were two attempts at reconciliation: one at the Council of Lyon in 1272 and another at the Council of Florence in 1439, but both came to nothing. The churches of Western and Eastern Christendom, Catholic and Orthodox, seemed destined to quarrel forever, with little care for all the consequences their disunity would bring.

CAST OF CHARACTERS



The Draculesti Court

Dracul, Prince of Wallachia
Mircea, Vladislaus and Radu, his sons
Cazan, first officer of the guard
Anton, a Manichean friar

The Turkish Court

Murad II, the Ottoman Sultan
Mehmet, his son and heir
Halil Pasha, the Grand Vizier
Georg Kastrioti, Albanian prince and hostage of
the Ottomans
Ahmed Gurani, a scholar of the Ottoman court
Azize Hatun, the Sultan's third wife
Djem, her son
The Valide Hatun, second wife of the Sultan,
mother of Mehmet
The Defterdar, treasurer to the Sultan
The Kizlar, chief eunuch and head of the seraglio
Athazaz, a soothsayer and dervish of the court

The Greeks

John VIII Palaiologos, the Greek Emperor
Constantine Palaiologos, the Emperor's brother

The Catholics

Janos Hunyadi, captain and governor of Hungary
and Transylvania

Cardinal Cesarini, cardinal to Pope Eugenius IV
Bishop of the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, on the

border between Transylvania and Wallachia

Father Popescu, a priest of the diocese of
Targoviste, in Wallachia

Various

Durad Brankovic, ruler of Serbia

Mara Brankovic, his daughter

PART ONE



CHAPTER 1

Alba Julia, Transylvania
September 1441

A PRIEST, GREEK BY his eyes, his beard and his profile, but Catholic by his robes, was riding hard towards a drawbridge and a gate. The grey stone cathedral of Alba Julia, his destination, towered like a guardian of Rome in the centre of the Transylvanian citadel. It was late afternoon, and the sky was deep with rain. Father Popescu held out his palm and caught the first frail drops as he arrived, his urgency forgotten for an instant until a sexton emerged from a gated entrance beneath the high-arched vestibule of the cathedral to receive him. Sliding deftly from his palfrey, he grasped his rosary and pressed his lips to the bishop's jewelled finger.

Muttering something about the difficulty of the journey, the shortening of the day and all in the certainty that the whole thing was bound to be a source of irritation, the Bishop of Alba Julia opened the vestry door and ushered him in.

‘And how are things at the Royal Court? How is Prince Dracul?’
‘He is doing his best, Your Excellency, but it is not easy. Wallachia is...’

‘Difficult. Yes, I know. Is it burial rites again?’

‘Worse,’ Popescu said, apologetic.

The bishop gestured to a chair, his mouth a slit of disapproval. ‘I don’t see what could be worse than Rumani rites.’ He glanced sharply at Popescu. ‘What is he doing about it this time, nothing I suppose?’

‘Prince Dracul? I don’t think he is aware of it. I am sorry, Your Excellency. Could I have something to drink? A little water will be enough.’

A cloud of incense, the remnants of a Mass, hung about the air. Vaulted rafters curled above their heads.

The bishop stirred, declared himself thoughtless and called the sexton in.

‘I have tried speaking to people, but it astonishes me how little they will actually say.’ Popescu put down his cup as though it might shatter in his hand. ‘What it is, you see, is that people are digging up their dead, exhuming them.’

‘From church ground?’

‘Yes. A few weeks after burial, usually.’

The bishop murmured an exclamation. ‘What in God’s name for?’

‘I wish I could say.’ Popescu pulled out a small roll of paper from inside his cassock belt. ‘I have been receiving letters from members of the diocese, although I’m not sure how many of them are genuine.’

The bishop turned his eyes – sharp, judicious, a shade of flinted charcoal – on the priest. ‘You have received letters and this is the first I hear of it?’

‘I didn’t want to make it a matter of contention.’

‘Between Dracul and yourself?’ the bishop asked, taking the letters from Popescu’s hand.

‘Between Prince Dracul and the Church,’ corrected Popescu.

The bishop thumbed through the letters. ‘They look genuine enough to me.’

‘Some of them, perhaps, although I really don’t think the accusations are justified. Dracul is a good man, Your Excellency, he needs our support.’

‘A good man does not mean much. He attends Mass at your church, I suppose?’

‘Regularly.’

The bishop wrinkled his nose. ‘A political manoeuvre. What he needs is to think a little less about his neighbours the Greeks and a little more about who is keeping him on his throne.’ He lowered the bundle of letters. ‘Have you tried containment?’

‘Locking the gates? Yes, Your Excellency, I have. But in my view the practice needs to be stopped at the root, that is the thing.’

‘And is there such a thing as a root?’

‘I think there is.’

‘Do you?’

‘What I am saying,’ said Popescu, stumbling on his words, ‘is that in Wallachia a death, any death, is not simple.’

‘Oh, I agree entirely. It is not simple, not simple at all. But once a corpse has been interred in the hallowed ground of a churchyard, to remove it is an act of violation, a heresy.’

‘But people do this because they are afraid, Your Excellency, not because they want to violate the law. That is the point; that is the root of the thing.’

The bishop handed him the letters and clasped his hands together. 'Father Popescu, a Wallachian is a Rumani, and a Rumani is a pagan. Doubtless they would rather burn their dead in their own backyard, but I hardly see what fear has to do with it.'

The wing of a bird fluttered in the rafters. The bishop rose to close the vestry door, which the sexton had left ajar. Popescu caught brief sight of his face, arrested in the twilight of the nave.

'The position of the Church is perfectly clear. Either we acknowledge *vampyr*s, sorcerors and the *strigois* of the Rumani and thereby expose ourselves to the confusion they will bring, or we resolve things as we have always done.'

'By ignoring them?' Popescu asked, shifting forward.

The bishop smiled thinly.

'But if we don't help these people what purpose does our office have?'

'The Catholic community is growing, Father, but we are far from what we should be in terms of numbers. And I doubt the Orthodox clergy would lend their weight to any form of intervention.'

'Then you will not give me your blessing to try?'

The bishop shook his head. 'I doubt my blessing would be sufficient. Besides, you cannot perform a Catholic *Rit-uale*, if that was what you had in mind, on a member of the Greek Orthodox Church who does not recognise your authority to do so.' He paused. 'Charming man, Dracul, isn't he? Hard to know what is going on in his head at the best of times, but he is almost a Greek.'

Popescu's face tightened. The bishop pushed his hands against his legs and drew himself up from his chair. 'The

Greeks have always liked to think that they can extract themselves from the grasp of evil without the guidance of the Church. I will write to Cardinal Cesarini and let him know what is happening. I doubt he'll be surprised.' He waited for Father Popescu to stand. 'Have you ever questioned him about his beliefs?

'Well, no. I wouldn't dream of...'

The bishop interrupted him. 'Then we will wait, and see if things get any worse.' He paused at the vestry door. 'He is aware of it, you know – Prince Dracul. Perfectly aware.'

Popescu turned his face towards the bishop. The sexton exited the nave, his cassock brushing stone. The rain had stopped.

CHAPTER 2

Targoviste, Royal Court of Wallachia

IT WAS LATE EVENING, a clear November night on the eve of Saint Andrew's. Vlad Dracula paused halfway down the stairwell, his hand floating over the banister. The cobbled yard had yielded up a visitor. Shielding his face from the bite of the wind, the visitor walked doggedly in the direction of the door and rang the bell. Because it was Saint Andrew's, their father had sent all three of them, Radu, Mircea and him, to their rooms with instructions to the servant that the doors be locked. Everyone locked their door on Saint Andrew's Eve; they said that the darkness drew out *strigois*, the kin of Zalmoxis. Not that it stopped Vlad from opening his. No door was locked when you had another key, and he was not afraid of anything, not like his older brother Mircea, who slept with the lamp lit.

He paused on the landing and looked out of the tower window to see who else was fearless. There were three

towers of chambers in the home of Targoviste, and they had moved there in the spring before Radu came along. After Radu was born their father liked to say that there was one tower for every child, but really it was three brothers to one tower and the second for their father. The third was kept empty – for visitors, their father said, when and if they came.

A torch spat fire in the courtyard, lighting up the double wall, the guardhouse and the gate. There was a watchtower too, and you could see the snowy mountains from the tower top. Their father said the mountains kept them safe, that the Carpathians were their shield, God's guard against their enemies. But Vlad had climbed that tower every morning and he knew his father gave them only one half of the truth. The north might be shielded, but the southern plains were open. After Bucharest there was just the Danube River, and a river would not save them. Even his little brother knew a Turk could build a boat.

One flight below him his father, Prince Dracul, walked out of the panelled salon and stopped directly in front of the entrance door. He nodded to Lela, who came out of her room at the foot of the stairs with a shawl around her smock, drew back the bolt and opened the great wooden door to Father Popescu, from the Chapel of the Holy Virgin outside the palace walls. Popescu stepped over the threshold of the Great Hall and removed his hat. Even though he'd crossed the courtyard on Saint Andrew's Eve he didn't look particularly fearless. His face was tight, and there was something in his fist, a bundle of papers he held against his chest.

The wind thrust its arm down the funnel of the Great Hall's chimney and plucked at the wood that was burning

in the hearth. There was always cedar on the fire, and there was always wormwood on the landing. If Lela were ever to let the fires go out, there would be trouble, and she filled the pot of wormwood every week. When they were young, their father used to say that they needed a veil of fire to shut out what was bad and keep in what was good. 'In light is salvation,' he said. 'There is no corruption in the flame.'

Once, when he was young, Vlad had passed his hand through his father's flame, just to see what it could do. It had hurt, but not so badly. He unclenched his fist and peered down at the padre's face. Whatever Popescu wanted, it clearly could not wait.

'I am glad to see your door is locked, Dracul.'

'You are fortunate that I have opened it, Father. It does not do to be out on a night like this; you should be more careful. Please come in.'

The priest stepped into the light. He held the papers up. 'Letters from your populace; I think you should read them.'

Vlad moved down another step. As his back brushed the pot of wormwood a leaf drifted downstairs. He held out his hand, followed it down and caught it. Lela looked up and saw him. He pressed a finger to his lips and slipped into the shadow of the upper storey landing. Lela disappeared fast and shut the door. His father glanced up once before he took the letters, pressed his hand on the priest's shoulder and ushered him into the salon.

Rustling paper, the letters from the populace, spilled into the hall.

'So, what do you want from me, what can I do?'

‘Attend Mass. Have your sons confirmed. Take the Eucharist in my sight. You know what rumour is.’

There was a momentary silence.

‘We attend the chapel at the Monastery of Saint Nicholas. It is enough.’

‘The Orthodox chapel is not mine.’

His father moved around the room. ‘If you want a Catholic in my seat, Father, you had better put one there.’

‘That is not the point, Highness.’

‘Then what is?’

‘Your other son.’

A wave of anger travelled up the stairwell. Vlad felt it pull him down the stairs.

‘He’s in the countryside, near Giurgiu, where he needs to be.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better if you brought him to court, where he can be administered to?’

No longer able to resist the need to enter, Vlad placed his hand on the salon door and pushed it open. Father Popescu turned. His father looked up.

‘How are you not in your chamber?’

‘I heard talking. I wanted to see who it was.’

His father’s face composed itself. ‘Please go back upstairs and remain there until I give you permission to come down again.’

Father Popescu stared at the floor. Vlad bowed, walked backwards a few paces as they always did in the presence of their father, and climbed the stairs again. Satisfied at having seen his father’s face, he paused at Mircea’s room on the first landing. The light of the lamp glowed through the crack at the foot of the door, but inside there was silence. His brother

was sleeping through Saint Andrew's Eve as if it was just another night. But it wasn't; besides being the night of the *upyr*, the spirits of the departed, Saint Andrew's Eve was also the night of Zalmoxis, legendary ruler of the Hun-conquering Goths, their ancestors. In Wallachia, some people believed that the wolf-king Zalmoxis had never existed at all, and they called his night Saint Andrew's Eve instead. But to him it felt more like a betrayal.

He tried the handle of Mircea's door to see if the servants had locked him in as well. They had. Not that they needed to; Mircea was not fearless, nor would he have been able to carve the likeness of a key from a piece of wood to open a lock. He preferred to sit with their father and talk about Aristotle and the Greeks. 'The Greeks are scholars,' Mircea said. 'We need them.'

'I don't need anyone,' he told him, 'I can get you at the end of a sword in three moves.'

The world did not belong to scholars; it was full of lies and trouble, and unless Mircea learned to use a sword better than a quill, he would never survive it. Vlad tried to tell his brother this but Mircea didn't want to hear.

He entered the chamber he shared with Radu. His younger brother slept like a dormouse, never waking except when it was dawn or when he was afraid. He was not afraid now, even on Saint Andrew's Eve. That was because Radu knew that he would protect him. He always had, even from Mircea, who sometimes liked to tease their younger brother. But what worried Vlad now were the letters the priest had brought and the wave of anger that had floated up the stairwell. Nobody provoked a Draculesti; the servants knew it, even the noblemen of Wallachia knew it. When the *boyars* came to call

about a law that needed changing or a tax that had not been paid, they chose their words carefully. He closed the door of his chamber and leaned his back against it. What bad news had he been banned from knowing? One part of him thought of returning downstairs when the house was quiet again, and finding out. He knew where their father kept his correspondence. It was in the drawer of his desk, or else it was behind the small red curtain in an alcove of the wall above the hearth. But another part shrank from it. He did not want to rouse another wave of anger. He didn't like the look his father wore when he was angry. It was a knowing look, as though his father had been expecting trouble all along, and he was at the root of it.

He slotted the key into the palm of his hand and kept it there. There was power in the possession of a key. A key was like a sword; it slid between two worlds, the living and the dead, and let the bearer through.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LUCILLE TURNER'S FIRST BOOK, *Gioconda*, was published by Granta Books in 2011. A novel about the life of Leonardo da Vinci, it went on to win the Hislibris prize for historical fiction and was translated into several languages. She has a Master's degree in Comparative Literature and has worked as a translator, a journalist, a teacher and a book reviewer. She lives between Bournemouth and Nice and blogs about historical fiction at www.lucilleturner.com.