

BRAM & VLAD

WELCOME TO EXETER!

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BRAM & VLAD

IN

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1



It was night in Transylvania. The moon was full, making the silhouette of the creepy castle visible. Wolves howled and mysterious cold lights would appear in the dark meadows. A sinister figure was riding a horse, a figure with glowing red eyes. He was the night! He was free! He was...

"Vlad Dracula II, come back right here!"



When he heard those words, the horse stopped at once. The 8-years-old boy with big fangs that rode it screamed, irritated:

"Blast it, Renfield, why do you always have to spoil everything?!"

Renfield was a strong-looking blond man, using security personnel clothes. He scratched the horse's ears, and the animal reciprocated it happily, stomping the ground. Frustrated, the little vampire dismounted and got his black hair off the eyes with an angry gesture. The bodyguard, then, scolded the boy:

"You shouldn't use your ceremonial clothes to ride, young master."

"Whatever." Vlad walked to the castle, stomping the ground angrily.

"And where is your cape?"

"No idea."

"Well, stop wasting time. You have to put your things in order; we will fly to England tomorrow."

"WHAT?!"

In his fury, Vlad jumped a two-story height and clung to the walls of the castle. He calculated in his mind how long it would take to reach the window and hide in a secret passageway.

"Young master, I'll give you two seconds to get down from here with your vampire dignity intact", Renfield threatened.

Normally, he wouldn't have the authority to threaten his little master, but it wasn't like Vlad's parents would care every time the servant stepped out of line. The little vampire didn't answer, he only showed his tongue to his guardian and tried to move along the wall quicker. Sighing, Renfield jumped and clung to the wall, too.

"I'll ask you to keep it in the records that I gave you a chance!"

Renfield got Vlad by his neck rudely and brought him down. Once in the ground, he dragged the boy by his ear to his room, scolding him all the while.

"You shouldn't be so selfish, young master. Here in the castle, everyone wants you dead, so you have to take better care of yourself. You are the Count's current heir, but if you aren't in the way, the master can choose any of the others. There, in England, you will live in the hunting grounds of the Van Helsings. No one with any share of brains will want to come near them."

"Hunting grounds of *who*?"

Renfield threw Vlad inside his room and locked the door.

"I see that you haven't been doing your homework. Look it up yourself on Google! And put your things in order, *understood*?"

The little vampire kicked random things in his room as he muttered some insults. He also threw some things from his desk to the ground with distaste. "This servant, who he thinks he is..."

It's not that Vlad hated Renfield, quite on the contrary. The blond man was his guardian since his birth. He didn't *have* to educate Vlad, but since the boy's parents were so absent, Renfield often had to fulfil the role of "the nagging guy who lectures children". Similarly, Vlad didn't have to hear him, since his guardian was his servant, but he ended obeying Renfield reluctantly, mainly because his father always sided with adults in those matters.

After he threw some more things on the ground and spent some time staring the ceiling, Vlad got his laptop and decided to satisfy his curiosity. He tried a few times, got some 'do you mean so and so?' and finally spelled 'Van Helsing' right. He opened the first Wikipedia link he found:

"Professor Abraham van Helsing is a character from the 1897 Gothic horror novel *Dracula*. Van Helsing is a Dutch doctor with a wide range of interests and accomplishments, partly attested by the string of letters that follows his name: "M.D., D.Ph., D.Litt., etc." The character is best known as a vampire hunter and monster hunter, and the archenemy of Count Dracula."

"Hm. Charming." The boy thought. "Apparently, this man was the leader of the group which killed my grandfather. These 'Van Whatever' must be descendants of this hunter. And I'm living next to those people because it will make myself safer...? Argh, I'll never understand my father."

He closed the laptop in a sour mood and started dropping things in an empty box. It was his videogames, some toys, some of his favourite clothes (which he never used because he always had to dress up like a 'little Count'), a little chest full of random items with sentimental value and a few other knick-knacks. Everything else could be bought anew when he got to his new house, he didn't care.

Finally, glancing uncertainly over his shoulders and making sure he wasn't being spied by anyone outside, Vlad fetched some books from a secret compartment in his wardrobe and hid them under everything in the box. He didn't need anyone annoying him due to his taste in books.

After making sure that his favourite goods were packed, the boy managed to convince Renfield to free him and ran to the Castle grounds, where his pet wolf awaited him. Vlad caressed the wolf's mane, played with him and, finally, let the wolf lay down with his paw over his master's knee.

"Father said that we can't bring you, Fangs. I think it's a huge stupidity. Why do we have to move out of here, after all? What difference will it make? I don't want to leave here and go to a strange place with a strange language. It's not fair!" He passed his hand over the wolf to calm himself. "At least, we will see each other when I come here for the ceremonies and all that. And at *the very* least, I won't have to see that Bathory monster so much."

Fangs snorted behind the boy's ears, who hugged him fighting his tears. Staying far away from his wolf would be painful.

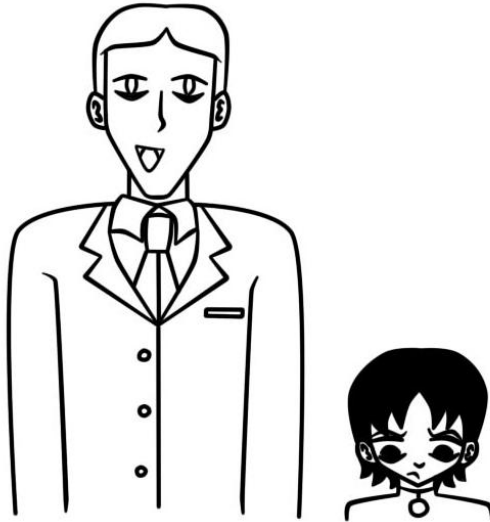


“Look, young master, it’s Kent! I was born there.”

Vlad looked through the plane window with a grimace, just as a favour to Renfield. He wanted to see England exploding itself, and all its denizens with it. He went right back to his portable videogame and kept making his character shoot hordes of zombies. Since his attention was all in the game, he barely registered the plane trip, the landing and the arrival in the new house, a big mansion in a rich area of the city of Exeter.

He barely noted that Renfield, beside him, was talking excitedly.

“This change will be good to you, young master, you just have to give it a chance. Put on your human disguise, go and make some friends. Don’t forget that, here, you are using the surname ‘Drake’ to avert attention.”



“Right.” Vlad answered, promptly.

Renfield looked at him with suspicion.

“Young master, are you at least hearing me?”

“Right” The boy said again, still distracted. He soon paid attention to the adult beside him again, though, because the game was beeping due to its low battery. “Where are the outlets in this place?”

He finally looked around him and noticed the house, the wallpaper that mimicked the castle tapestries, and the furniture that were identical to the ones there. For a brief moment, he almost felt himself at home, but he soon focused in looking for an outlet for his game. Renfield looked at him, resenting a little the way that the boy neglected everything, but looking amused at some private joke at the same time. At last, he revealed, in a neutral voice:

“The manor doesn’t have power, and, since it’s late, we can only call a technician tomorrow morning, during commercial time. What about that little walk outside that I suggested?”

The boy froze. It was a little past seven p.m. He would spend the whole night without games, without internet or anything electronic to distract himself in that lame place? It almost made it worth to walk outside!

After some insistence from Renfield, Vlad finally entered in his room and picked his “human clothes” (that is, decent clothes, which wouldn’t make him look like a Cinderella extra). Everything was black: a black leather jacket, black trousers and black shoes that resembled military boots. Smirking a little, the little vampire served himself in a hair gel pot and used it to make his hair into a fauxhawk. He knew that his parents wouldn’t approve of that hairstyle, but they couldn’t interfere in his choices for his “human disguise”.

When Renfield saw that little pale boy with dark shadows under his eyes - a boy that he always knew as a dispirited little prince - dressed as a small punk, the bodyguard made an effort not to laugh. The style suited the boy (he was really cute, to be honest), but it was too different of his usual style.

“Have your parents seen you already?” He asked, with his best poker face.

“No.” Vlad answered straight-faced. “Let’s go or what?”

“Hm, another thing, young master.” Renfield was still having troubles keeping a professional face and not pinching the cheeks of that cute little boy. “I’ll follow you discreetly. I want you to have the chance to socialize a bit, and I fear that having a bodyguard at your side all the time will get people away from you. Don’t worry. Even if I’m invisible or hidden, I won’t get too far away from you and I’ll be ready to act if something happens.”

Vlad bit his lip. He had never left the castle unattended. He had never been seen alone. He had never been presented anywhere as anything less than a little nobleman that could order his servants to get rid of any undesirable person. Vlad would never admit it, but he felt his feet cold as he left the walls of the manor “alone”, dressed (and obligated to act) as a common boy.

After he walked a few blocks and decided that it would probably be best to come back home already, he heard a whisper:

“Psst, young master, come here for a second!”

The voice came from a little bush, which kept talking:

“Take a look at that little square.”

“What gives?”

“You know that ginger boy, talking with the bespectacled one?”

“Yes, so what?”

“Well, he is... Whoops, he is coming here, behave yourself!”

In fact, the ginger boy with curly hair and deep blue eyes had noticed Vlad and immediately came to him. He was using a bright blue neck kerchief, that the little vampire couldn’t help but notice.

“Hey! You are new here!” The boy said, smiling. “What’s your name?” He waited for half a second, but since Vlad didn’t even move, spooked, the boy kept on talking: “I’m Abraham van Helsing IV, but that’s an awfully long name, so you can call me Bram, glad to meet you!”

Bram offered his hand and stood there, smiling expectantly. Vlad was in shock. Not only a stranger had talked to him, this stranger just had to be one of those vampire hunters that seemed to be mortal enemies of his family. Since Bram kept his hand extended, waiting for an answer (and

that was starting to unnerve the little vampire), Vlad puffed his chest and tried to be intimidating:

“Hi, commoner. I’m Vlad Dracula II, son of Viktor, grandson of Vlad and next Count of Wallachia.”

Still with his arm extended, Bram stared Vlad’s long fangs and breathed deeply.

“Y-You are a vampire!” he said, in what appeared to be a fear voice, but that didn’t smell anything like fear.

“So...?” Vlad didn’t understand; the ginger was a hunter or something like that, wasn’t him? He should know better.

“Don’t bite me, please!”

Bram’s expressions were still showing fear, but now, there was a nothing of laughter in his voice. Vlad suspected that the other was pulling his leg, so he decided to cut that out:

“Naw, my parents told me not to eat junk food.”

“Wait! ‘Junk food’?” the ginger boy dropped any pretence of fear.

BRAM & VLAD - JUNK FOOD (2)



The boys friendly exchanged sarcasm for a while, until Bram got curious:

“But what are you doing so far away from home, Vlad? The Draculas live in Romania, don’t they?”

Vlad shrugged.

“We are living here now. They say that your family will protect me, whatever that means.”

“Hum. Weird. Dad hasn’t said anything about us having a protégée. Say, Vlad, before you go back home, do you want to go to mine and meet my parents?”

“Meet even more humans? Why?”

“Well, you said earlier that the lights in your manor are out until tomorrow.”

“So what?”

Bram smiled more broadly than before:

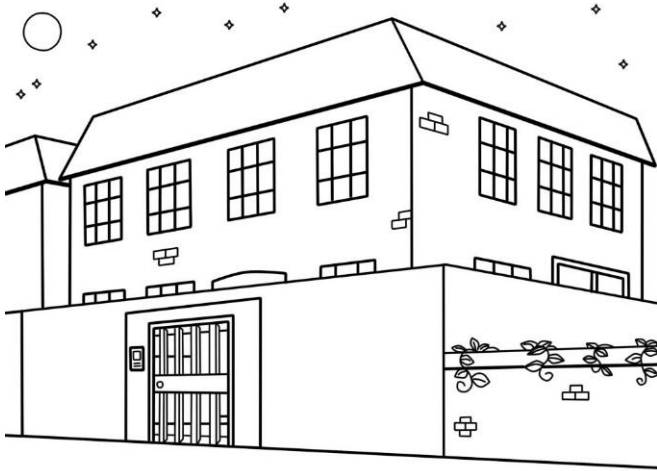
“So I have an Xbox with two controllers.”

The vampire boy panicked for two milliseconds at the prospect of going to some strangers’ house, especially because those strangers were vampire hunters. In the middle of this, he saw Renfield behind a tree making a thumbs-up. Vlad relaxed from his tension and answered as lightly as he could:

“OK, I guess I can meet some more humans.”

III

Bram took his new acquaintance to a calm street. There were two big twinned houses, covered in cobblestone, behind tall concrete walls. They weren't as big as Dracula Manor, or the castle in Transylvania, but they were more impressive than the neighbouring houses.



“Ta-da!” the boy pointed to the house on the right. “Wait just a minute, because I have to authorize your entrance. You must have a guardian with you, right? I haven’t seen anyone, but he is probably invisible or something. Ask him to identify himself.”

Vlad didn’t need to say anything before Renfield appeared besides him.

“I am Charles Renfield, young master.” He said, respectfully. “Half-vampire and personal bodyguard of young master Dracula. I ask permission to enter your house.”

Bram smiled.

“You are well educated, you.” He laughed. “One moment.”

He entered the gate and touched something behind the wall. Vlad felt a jolt and saw his bodyguard clenching his hands. Bram motioned them in.

“You can enter now.”

Once inside the house, the ginger boy showed them all the rooms.

“This is the living room, this is the dinner room, but that is not important. Come here.” They entered a corridor, turning left at the hall, and were guided into a double door. “Mum is here.”

Vlad listened to Renfield blowing air through the lips, like he was whistling silently. They had entered a huge two-story library. It looked more like an institutional library, not a private collection. There was a table cluttered with paper behind a bookshelf, where a blonde stocky woman was consulting an assortment of books. She didn't notice at first that she had visitors.

“Mum?” Bram called. “I want to present some people to you!”

“Very well, who are those friends of yours?”

“Vlad, Mr. Renfield, this is Violet, my mother. She is a professor at Exeter University. Mummy, these are Vlad Dracula and Charles Renfield, they have just moved here to town.”

She opened her green eyes widely, then smiled.

“Welcome to Exeter! What are you doing here, so far from home?”

It took them more than two minutes to answer, so Bram took the lead:

“Gosh, mum, you don't know? Vlad said that we will protect him!”

“Yeah?” She raised her eyebrows and looked at Renfield over her glasses. “Interesting. Let me tell you what we will do: I will talk a little with Mr. Renfield here and you boys will have some fun. I will again in a jiffy.”

Bram held Vlad by the shoulders and took him out of the library.

“Come, come, daddy is in the lab, you will love the lab!”

Renfield didn't dare to disobey Violet's demand.

The laboratory occupied the entire basement. Bram put his password in the door mechanism and motioned Vlad to follow him. The two boys walked through a narrow corridor, where they were showered with light beams and coloured lights. When they came out of it, they were in a big lab, with lots of shelves, cupboards, fridges, counters for chemical experiments, posters and some doors. One of those had a red light on and a poster warning: "ANOMALY ROOM – Don't enter if the light is on."

"Oh, drat, dad must be working on something in the Anomaly Room." Bram frowned. "Let me show you the rest of the laboratory. Here, take a lab coat."

"Why?" Vlad went away from the lab coats as if they would shock him. "It's a nerd thing."

"No, it's something to protect your clothes from smelly liquids and corrosives. Well, your loss." Bram shrugged and put on a lab coat. He took safety glasses and a pair of rubber gloves from the pockets.

They went through one of the doors, and, in this new room, there were a lot of horizontal freezers, shelves with glass pots and a dissection table. Vlad couldn't help but notice that the table had shackles pending by its sides. His feelings of confusion, disgust and some fear appeared clearly enough on his face, because Bram immediately explained:

"We don't tie living people on the table. The problem is that some bodies end up possessed sometimes, and they start to wander and to cause trouble."

"The bodies end up possessed", the little vampire repeated slowly. "Wow."

Bram laughed.

"We only make paranormal research down here; if it was normal research, we would do it in universities. Most of our pieces are haunted or weird, generally speaking." He lowered the voice into a whisper. "Do you want to see a piece?"

Vlad looked directly at him.

“‘Piece’ is a corpse?”

“Or part of one.”

“I pass.”

“Your loss. I would take you to the deposit and to the quarantine room, but I’m barred from those places. You know what, let’s play a little and we talk with dad later.”

They went out of the dissection room. When they got back to the main lab, the red light at the Anomaly Room door was off. A tall person with a hazmat suit came from there, holding a strange cylinder that glowed in violet tones.



“Ah! There you are, Fourth!”, said the man inside the suit, when he saw the boys. “And hi, friend of his, we will talk in a sec. Son, would you please run the light on my back, to check if I cleaned all the fluids?”

Bram obeyed and used the violet cylinder to light the piece of suit on the man’s back. A stain glowed brightly, near the person’s neck.

“There’s a little on your scruff, dad.” The small ginger boy informed, all serious.

The man took the cylinder back, pressed some buttons and put it over the bright stain. It bubbled, like it was boiling, and quickly vanished.

“Argh, decontaminating yourself is a bother! I was lucky you were there, child. The anomaly is restless. It’s possible that we will have a haunting today, get the gear already.” He took the suit off without shutting up, and hanged it next to the door of the Anomaly Room. “Now we can talk. Who is this miniature vampire and what is it doing here?”

Vlad stuck his tongue out to him and didn’t feel like answering. The man laughed and Bram answered him:

“This is Vlad Dracula, dad. He is living here, now. Vlad, this is my father. His name is Abraham van Helsing III, and he works as a neurosurgeon in Exeter Hospital. In our family, they call me Fourth and they call my father Third, because our names and nicknames are the same.”

“Are you Viktor’s son?” The Third asked this bending down to see Vlad better. “I thought that he didn’t want to see me even in a golden plate. What is your family doing here?”

Again, Bram explained it without letting the other talk:

“He said that he is here because we will protect him.” Since his father was about to ask something, the boy added: “Mum is already talking about that with Vlad’s bodyguard in the library.”

“I should go there, then.” The Third left the lab in a broad pace and the boys followed him.

While he went to the library, Vlad was led to the second floor of the house and both entered a small room, with a sofa and a television.

“Let’s play some?” With one of his bigger smiles, Bram tossed Vlad an Xbox controller, and the vampire finally felt better. He would finally have fun!

They discussed a little until they chose the game that they would play and were excited to start. They turned the console on, loaded the game and readied themselves in their places.

But the lights went off.

The windows slammed shut and a scary noise could be heard nearby. Vlad stood up, ready to fight whatever was there, but his host just sighed and turned a torchlight on.

“Dad was right, we have a haunting tonight.” With his night vision, Vlad saw when Bram got some strange goggles and gloves out of his pockets. The boy put them on and turned to Vlad: “Let me see if we have some spare stuff for you.”

The boy opened a drawer in the nearest cabinet and gave Vlad an equipment similar to his own. When Vlad put the goggles on, he could see peculiar glowing stains on the walls.

“What’s this?!”

“These goggles let you see ectoplasm.” Bram explained, using the torchlight to search the room. “With this, we can see the ghost. Its apparition is messing with the electrical network. We have to destabilize its ectoplasm cover, so it stops acting over matter. Press the blue buttons in the glove to activate it, and you will be able to manipulate ectoplasm. Now go, we have to find and dispatch this ghost before it escapes. This thing in my hand is not just a torchlight, it’s also a violet light ‘shooter’, it will get the job done.”

“Have you ever done it before?” Vlad asked, looking suspiciously towards the torchlight.

“At least once a week since I have the strength to hold the shooter.” Bram answered, calmly. “The anomaly that we have in the basement is a rip in reality, and it gives ectoplasm away, so the ghosts can cover themselves. I don’t know how, nor where does all that ectoplasm come from, that’s why it’s an anomaly.”

Vlad couldn’t even pretend that he understood half of what the other said, but he understood that he wouldn’t play any games until the ghost haunting that place was caught. This put the creature on top of his list of annoyances to be dealt with.

After making sure that the ghost wasn’t in that room, Bram opened the door to the corridor and checked.

“There he is, Vlad” the boy whispered, pointing to the far away corner of the hall. “We can’t let it escape!”

The boy run off and pushed one of the buttons of his lantern, from which a purple light flashed. The ghost dodged the light cackling

manically and flew in the boys direction. Vlad felt a wind passing by him and it made him shiver. The apparition stopped at the other end of the corridor and raised a finger. A framed picture darted from a small table and would have hit them, if the small vampire wasn't quick enough to catch it. Bram flashed the purple light another time, but the ghost dodged it again and passed through the wall into another room.

Vlad cringed and figured out what to do. He ran with all his vampire speed and entered the room where the ghost had vanished to. The glowing man was now near the ceiling, mocking the boy. Vlad decided that he was done with it. He jumped higher than any human could and grabbed the ghost's leg, thanks to the glove he was using. It was a weird feeling, being able to hold something that felt like air.

The ghost let out a high-pitched scream and struggled frantically, but he wasn't a match to Vlad's strength. At this point, Bram arrived at the door and smiled broadly when he saw that the ghost was secure.

"Close your eyes, Vlad!"

The boy flashed the purple light for the third time. The ghost started to scream again, but he stopped all of a sudden. Vlad couldn't feel it anymore in his hands; the lights blinked and went on again. Bram cheered with a slap on the little vampire's back.

"We are the best de-ghosting pair out there! I can already see our agency slogan: 'Bram and Vlad, ghostbusters'!"

Vlad thought it was stupid beyond measure, but he wanted to make a specific point clear:

"And why does your name come first?"

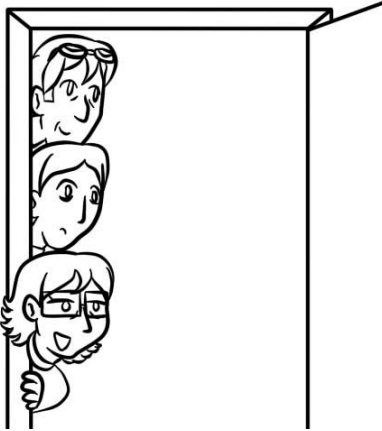
"Because 'Vlad and Bram' doesn't have the same ring to it, silly. I know that after all this, you are probably done for the night, but I guess that we won't have any more haunting for today. Let's finally play something?"

They both entered the television room and slouched again on the couch. It was at this moment that the three adults in the house came to the door.

"Are you all right, boys?", Bram's mother asked, anxiously.

“Oh, yes, we caught the ghost” Bram answered casually, without even glancing her. “Vlad helped.”

“Thanks, God!” She took a deep breath. “We had a big problem down there, but we solved it. The night should be calm from now on. Well, have fun, sweeties.”



She dragged the two men with her before they could speak anything. Finally, both boys could concentrate in what was truly important: the game.

Bram was a decent, if not exceptional, player, and Vlad appreciated the level of challenge in their matches. He was in a strange land, in a strange house, with stranger people, but, for the first time in that night, it didn't bother him.

At eleven o'clock, Renfield entered the room where the boys played.

“We should head home, young master; humans go early to bed.”

“We're going already?!”

“Yes, we are going already. You still have to organize your things in your new room.”

No protest or threat from Vlad could change his mind. Bram turned the Xbox off a bit sadly.

“Don’t worry, Vlad, you can come back tomorrow.”

“And why would I come back to this madhouse tomorrow, when the lights of the manor will be already on?!”, he answered back, grumpily.

Despite that tirade from the boy, everyone in that room knew that he would come back again the next day.

Epilogue

When Vlad and Renfield went out of his house, Dr. Van Helsing talked with his wife about the situation. After they finished talking the vital points of the matter, he went to the telephone and dialled a known number:

“Hello? Dad?”

“Third, is it you?” an old man answered, in Dutch.

With a few words, the Third explained everything that happened that night, while the other heard silently. Finally, he answered:

“This can end up working in our favour. I’ll warn them that the Draculas are in Exeter and we will see what we should do.”

Many kilometres away from there, in a luxurious apartment in London, a man answered his phone and heard what was said to him.

“Hm. The Count’s heir is in England? For real? What kind of madness was that, bringing him here?” His voice showed signs that he was feeling insulted.

The voice on the other side of the line spoke for a while, but it was cut without hesitation.

“Van Helsing’s hunting grounds? He says that like it is a great protection. It’s about time for everyone to see these Joes as the really are: not living legends, nor menacing people, but as a group of nerds with their toys. Pay attention to what I say, this was Viktor’s last mistake. This time, he *will* fall.



Coming next...

To the surprise of no one, Vlad returns to Bram's home to deal with his boredom. The red-head decides to present his new acquaintance to his neighbour and best friend, Lucy Harker, and to her brother, Quincey.

Everything is fine, until Lucy's father brings a guest to stay with the family for the night. He looks normal and nice, but Bram is convinced that the man is dangerous.

Is the little vampire hunter just paranoid? Does he have a point? Don't forget to check these children's next adventure, in *Harker's Guest!*

