



Varney the Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood

James Malcolm Rymer , Curt Herr (Introduction)

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After 100 years of neglect, the potboiler Penny Dreadful Varney The Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood returns in this innovative critical edition to entertain a whole new generation of readers. Sold for a penny a chapter on the streets of London in 1845, Varney the Vampire is a milestone of Vampire fiction, yet ignored and overlooked for nearly 100 years, until now!

The Critical Edition of Varney the Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood includes:

- A critical introduction about the Penny Dreadful Press and the lore of the Mid 19th Century Vampire
- Over 200 notes explaining references, historical information, and corrections to the text
- A variety of 19th century essays explaining the horrors and dangers of (gasp!) reading Penny Dreadfuls
- Contemporary critical essays on James Malcolm Rymer and his most famous Penny Dreadfuls: Varney the Vampire and Sweeney Todd
- Four additional early Penny Dreadfuls detailing insanity, family cannibalism, torture gone wrong, and other bedtime stories
- A reader's guide
- Reproductions of the original woodcut illustrations

Varney the Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood Details

Date : Published October 31st 2007 by zittaw press (first published 1845)

ISBN : 9780979587153

Author : James Malcolm Rymer , Curt Herr (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 812 pages

Genre : Paranormal, Vampires, Classics, Fantasy, Historical, Victorian, Literature, 19th Century

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From Reader Review Varney the Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood for online ebook

Bettielee says

I feel weird giving it 4 stars... but I loved the rollicking pace and the authors occasional "asides" - meaning, the little stories thrown in for no reason. But it was a mix of scary and funny, the ridiculous, the sublime. You have to be patient with it and remember you are reading a penny dreadful - this isn't Shakespeare or Bram Stoker, for that matter. It's all about sensationalism. The ending upset me... but I won't ruin it for you.

Adriana says

I have to admit, upfront, that I didn't finish this book. I plan to (someday), but right now all I really want is to put as much distance between me and Varney. The breaking point was getting to the end of my kindle version and realizing that, besides the 96 chapters contained in it, I had 124 more to look forward to. 124 more chapters filled with more and more repetitive actions, mindless chatter, and a vampire that instead of looking like this:

Is more and more looking like a 19th century version of this:

“Varney the Vampire or the Feast of Blood” starts promising enough. In the middle of a stormy night, a beautiful maiden is attacked by a vampire and left for dead while her brothers hunt the villain. As the story progresses we learn that the girl, Flora, survived the attack and is now the middle of a convoluted plot designed by her attacker to gain possession of the house her family inhabits. At first the mystery is compelling and I honestly couldn't wait to read what happened next (hence the 3 star rating) but before long the rhythm of the story starts to become repetitive: Varney does something, a furious mob attacks, he hides. Then he finds some other hideout, another mob appears, and he runs again. Little by little the force of that first chapter, the strength and terrifying power of the monster that is so apparent there dilutes, and by the time I gave up all I had left was the silhouette of a broken man tumbling along and trying to atone for past mistakes.

That being said, I also believe that any self-respecting vampire fan should at least take a peek at this story. The influence it has on Dracula is clear, except for the restoring power of moonbeams and the ability of walking in daytime without any decrease in power. Varney (at the beginning, at least) has that hypnotic power over his victims that forces them to submit to his will, and a level of class and distinction that vampires didn't have before. Too bad that at times he resembles Edward Cullen more than the Lord of Darkness, but at least he doesn't sparkle.

The rest of the characters in “Varney the Vampire” are pretty bland. Flora and her fiancé, Charles Holland, fill the hero and heroine rolls to perfection, even desiring no harm upon the being that almost took away the sanity of said girl despite his many, many crimes. The only exceptions to the rule are Admiral Bell and his best friend/servant, Jack Pringle. Their constant arguments and expressions were a much welcome relief,

even if later they also got a bit tedious.

But even after everything I said before, one has to keep in mind that this book was published as a series, a “penny dreadful”. It was meant to entertain and amuse through short chapters and it’s kind of unfair to judge it by today’s standards. It does manage to engage the attention and, with heavy (HEAVY) editing it could have been a memorable vampire tale. I hope to finish it one day and tell you how the story of “Varney the Vampire or the Feast of Blood” ends.

R. says

Var-neeey, Varney Vampire; King of the Wild Frontierrrr...

Janet Robel says

A beautifully rendered classic tale of the Vampyre. This Victorian era Penny Dreadful about Varney the Vampyre is a huge tome of a novel but well worth the time and effort to read. This really brought me back to the days when vampire books were all the rage and flying off the shelves at bookstores. True vampire fans will absolutely love this book and the detailed illustrations and want it for their keeper shelves. This is a superb reminder of why paranormal books are still going strong after all these generations.

Leah says

If you read this monstrous serial with an expectation of quality (or even coherency) you will be sorely disappointed. If you want a nonsensical never-ending litany of absurdities mixed up with some interesting conventions of early vampire literature, however, this is your book. There's a suggested scythe duel in a medically sealed darkness chamber, a mob discovering that their accused vampire has transmogrified himself into a brick, the build-up to a mysterious midnight meeting being derailed due to a clock misread, and five or so weddings worth of repetitive hijinx. Varney the Vampire might not be well-written or make much sense, but its a wonderfully fun ride.

Andrew says

More than a little long and I can see why some folks didn't persevere..it's a lengthy tome and maybe due to its serial type status is repetitive to circumstance and dialogue throughout...not to mention diversions and tales that really have nothing to do with the actual story.

That said there is also much to commend it..as a work it does have some humour and is acknowledged as presenting certain aspects to the whole Vampire mythos (Dracula included).

It really gathers pace about half way through...before that it relies on a dualing etiquette and an overlong neighbourly dispute between a family and proposed Vampire..the action does rattle along for a while however though the last one tenth of the novel is again maybe too much.

Not then a novel I suspect I will revisit soon but one on which ultimately I am glad I have some familiarity

with.

Surreysmum says

I read this potboiler, in this edition, when I was an undergraduate (a very, very long time ago), and have always had a yen to revisit it. I was pleasantly surprised, and very amused. This facsimile reprint gives ample evidence of how little care was bestowed on the physical production of the novel - it's the 1847 full-length edition that's reproduced, and it's just chock-a-block with bad chapter numbering and pagination, not to mention chunks of type being banged out of alignment or knocked out altogether from the edges of what I presume were stereotype plates. The proofreading could have used a bit of a boost too. But the anonymous author's lamentable tendency to shift back and forth between present and past tense whenever he embarks on a scene-setting "atmospheric" description notwithstanding, this is actually not a bad writer we have here. His vocabulary is extensive and correct; he has a better ability to compose a complex sentence grammatically than about 90% of today's undergraduates, and he has a fecundity of imagination equal to the task of padding out his chapters to the requisite number of inches for the week's instalment.

Indeed, had "Varney the Vampire" been closed out at the end of what is now Volume 1, around page 450, I would have claimed for it some higher qualities, including an interesting suggestiveness about Varney's origins as a vampyre - or indeed, whether he really is a vampyre at all. The lengthy story arc, that of Varney's relations with the Bannerworth family, only really tells us that Varney is convinced that his life is under some sort of charm, and that he believes he has to prolong it periodically - every few months - by a little blood-sucking from a young beautiful female (no others need apply). There is some considerable effort to give Varney an ambivalent moral status; he is generous and charming, and also the victim or potential victim of some really repugnant mob violence. And the mysterious death-and-resurrection of which we eventually learn doesn't take place in typical vampire circumstances at all, but is the experimental resurrection of a hanged criminal by a young doctor.

After the Bannerworth story arc is concluded, the author (who has already been falling back on expedients like "nested" supernatural tales that have nothing to do with the main narrative), seems to run out of steam, and he merely plays two-to-ten-chapter variants on three scenarios: the vampire is resuscitated from death by moonlight upon his corpse, the vampire arrives in town and courts a respectable young lady in hopes of getting married and providing himself with a consistent source of blood, or the vampire appears in some place of public resort like an inn, and attacks a humble but beauteous young female in the middle of the night. In either of the latter cases, he is discovered - sometimes by some character from the previous adventure - and has to flee. The settings are varied (the most distant is a nunnery in Italy), and the nature, motives, and habits of the proposed victims are varied along a spectrum from the sentimental to the broadly comic, but any attempt at psychological subtlety pretty much goes out the window, and as our author goes through the motions, the "rules" of this author's vampire world seem to calcify (young female victims only, moonlight revives the corpse, and the natural world conspires to ensure that the corpse finds itself in moonlight); one wonders just how much this affected later readers?/authors like Stoker. In any case, there are clear signs of relief, I think, towards the end, when the author decides to wrap things up, and gives Varney a serious case of depression, and a suicidal impulse which results in his throwing himself into Vesuvius.

In the course of such a long tale, there are some choices that are cause for giggles for the reader (and quite possibly for the author). The fact that while all the upper-class young ladies have traditional Gothic-heroine names like Flora, Clare and Annabel, all the lower-class young ladies destined to be blood-sucked are without fail named Mary, certainly had me snorting. The red shirts of the vampire world, as it were. Then

there was, in a late stage, the appearance of a character named Dr. Polidori (or Pollidori - both versions were used). And I think maybe someone went to a performance of Macbeth? because one of the few incidents that broke the tedious pattern of the second volume was a veritable calling together of a coven of vampires, on Hampstead Heath, of course.

There's something rather charming about the naively pre-Freudian nature of Varney's vampirism, or at least about the author's way of describing it. We are told many times that it is the vampire's nature to seek out only young beautiful women (which leaves the author in a bit of a bind if he also wants to follow up on the notion that taking someone's blood turns them into a vampire - this author does that only once and then kills off the young-lady-vampire very quickly after one indirectly described feeding from a "Mary" before things get too dicey with any possible lesbian implications). Far from making the sex=feeding connection, the author, from the vantage-point of Varney's internal dialogue, explicitly denies it. Especially in this century, with the current vampire mania being an explicit vehicle for the current younger generation's hormonal urges (of all persuasions and orientations), that the author could expect his readers not to make the connection is, well, rather sweet, though of course irritatingly heterosexist, etc. etc.

I see there is a new edition of "Varney the Vampyre" that unequivocally ascribes the authorship to James Malcolm Rymer, an attribution strongly suggested but not fully insisted upon by E.F. Bleiler, the editor of this late-70s facsimile reprint. So perhaps some day I shall hunt down the latest edition and find out more; for now, though, it's been a lovely little return visit to a class of literature that occupied much of my time and thoughts during some of the happiest days of my life.

Suvi says

Evokes gothic atmosphere maybe with three sentences overall (the first chapter is alright). Varney's interesting in theory, as he's a sympathetic vampire and by far the only character who actually has a soul (ha!). The others are like cardboard cutouts. Not that there seems to be any logic to the story itself, anyway. Rymer either forgot every once in a while what his book was about, or he was so broke that he absolutely had to bloat the text by every means necessary, including ministories here and there that have no bearing on the story whatsoever. A hack writer if there ever was one. Or maybe he just stopped giving a flying fuck.

Would I pay a penny for each installment? Hell no. I knew this would be bad, being a penny dreadful and all, but I didn't expect an exhausting bore. So much so, that it wasn't even funny anymore.

Signor Mambrino says

Montague Summers described Varney the Vampyre as being "far ghostlier than" and "a very serious rival to" Dracula. The book was out of print when he wrote that though, so that might have just been him trying to be the cool guy who liked the less popular work. I definitely wouldn't go as far as Monty in this case, but I did really enjoy this book. I mean, it's deeply flawed, but if you take it for what it is, i.e., complete trash, it's d____d enjoyable. It's exceedingly obvious that the author/authors were making it up as they went along, and a lot of it doesn't stand up to scrutinous examination, but if you like stories about graveyards, ghouls, chivalrous gentlemen, foul mouthed sailors, bloody murders, and heaving bosoms, this will entertain you greatly. I fucking loved it, and it has me looking forward to reading more of the Penny Dreadfuls that have come out in the Wordsworth Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural series. I have Wagner the Werewolf by

Reynolds on my shelf, and I know they have also put out *The String of Pearls*, the other work by Rymer and Prest.

FULL REVIEW

Lorraine says

Very, very poorly structured. Would be better as a collection of short stories. Was very bored after the second 'episode'. Skipped a lot of it. Backstory of vampire insufficiently developed. If you want a backstory, make it proper! Ending unsatisfactory too. Episodes repetitive and annoying. I would say that it had a lot of potential, in terms of psychologising the vampire, but fails to live up to any of it

Roberta says

And so it ends, and I'm thankful.

Don't get me wrong, it's an interesting story dotted with british humour, but there's too much in it. Well, everything is in it! All the clichés: Dracula and Frankenstein, sailors and pirates, gambling and murder, nighttime stolling to shallow graves, kidnapping, lies and deceiving... you name it. But in the end all of these plot twists are too much and yes, it does resemble a modern soap-opera.

It's my first attempt at a "penny dreadful" novel: not bad, but not great either.

Derek Davis says

I read a free download, and only because I'd heard it was perhaps the first genuine vampire novel, from the early 19th century. Nobody even seems to be sure who actually wrote it (in those magazine-serialized "penny dreadful" days of pay-by the-word). OK, it's bad. It's really, really, really bad. But if you can download it for free, dip into it now and then, giggle and put it away again. It's, well...friendly. I mean, the vampire isn't a wholly bad guy, the "rational" debunker is a little wacko himself, and everybody else.... The main problem, which probably had to do with the pay rate, is that each scene is described, somebody then describes the same scene at length to someone else, who then says, "My God," and repeats the description to someone else, and this goes on and on. What amazes me is that I read through the whole thing. What's wrong with me?

Christopher Roth says

The bad news is that the Project Gutenberg free ebook version of this I read had only 96 out of 110 or so chapters, so I still don't know how it ends, darnit. The good news is: despite being a "penny dreadful" it holds up extremely well against Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. It's too long by far, and the dialogue is hilariously stilted, but the latter is also true of *Dracula*, and Varney is smarter in a lot of ways, including excellent scenes of an angry mob becoming convinced that every neighbor might be a vampire. This book languishes in undeserved

obscurity. Comic version to come out soon, I hear.

James says

It took me ages to finish this book, which is reputedly longer than War and Peace & Gone with the Wind combined. Yet it's a rewarding slog, if heavy-going at times; one can see the vampire sub-genre forming before one's eyes. The book was originally published in weekly instalments as a "Penny Dreadful" and came out over a couple of years. Clearly, the author (now presumed to have been Rymer rather than Prest) had little opportunity to plan the thing from week to week and the story is all over the place.

The initial plot has Varney, who may or may not be a genuine vampire, terrorising a family called the Bannerworths for financial rather than occult reasons. After the Bannerworth plot exhausts itself, Varney is then propelled into a variety of other adventures, too many of which (at least 5) involve him nearly getting a young maiden to the altar only to be exposed for what he is at the eleventh hour. For me, the most enjoyable of these involves him disguising himself as the mysterious Baron Stoltmeyer of Saltzburgh, buying a country pile and attempting to con a craven member of the local middle-classes into giving him her daughter. The mother, as so many of the characters herein, has a certain Dickensian vitality and the writing is for the most part entertaining enough carry the reader through the extreme marathon of reading the entire book.

Most of the tropes of later Vampire fiction are here in nascent form, although Varney has no fear of daylight, garlic nor crosses. He has fanged teeth and feasts from the necks of young women, one of whom he turns into a vampire herself. Varney is killed a number of times but rises under the power of moonbeams; there is a striking chapter where Varney joins some others of his tribe to resurrect a fellow vampire by disinterment and exposure to La Luna. Varney is a Romantic, almost existentially suffering creature and often bitterly regrets his life as a vampire; his end (and the book's) is a jump into the volcano Vesuvius, where presumably the moonshine will not penetrate and he will die a longed-for death.

It is never quite clear how long Varney has been a vampire. In the Bannerworth plot, he seems to be recently made one but later he writes a memoir about having been first made vampire in the era of the English Civil War. Other occasions contradict this. Clearly the author had trouble remembering what he had previously written; understandable as he was doubtless bashing out other Dreadfuls at the same time as this.

For any student of the vampire sub-genre, Varney is essential if exhausting reading. Others might approach with caution, depending on their tolerance for picaresque narrative, Victorian caricatures and attitudes, an authorial editorialising voice and a hell of a lot of repetition. But there's also a lot of enjoyment to be had in the pages of Varney. I am glad to have gone through it.

D.M. Dutcher says

God my brain. If you read this in the right mood it can be hilarious, but this is one hell of a slog for something that bears little resemblance to modern vampires and doesn't have plot holes, it has plot subways. I'm not even going to try to synopsise this, but just list the characters.

Flora Bannerworth: The chick. Varney wants to suck her blood, then softens to her, and just wants her out of the way so he can get into Bannerworth Hall. Is engaged to Charles Holland and her brother is Henry.

She has the personality of a block of wood. Is just there to be menaced and fought over. She shoots Varney once or twice.

Henry Bannerworth: Head of Bannerworth estate, rather sickly. Wants to kick Varney's ass, generally fails in doing so. In a hilarious scene, he calls Varney a vampire to his face, and is made to look like an idiot despite it being true. Also has the personality of a block of wood. It must run in the family. He also shoots Varney, during a duel.

Mr Marchdale: Family friend of the Bannerworths. Is surprisingly kick-ass. Crack shot, who shoots Varney multiple times, once being a hilarious snipe at range when Varney is recovering from being shot from the last evening. Likes Flora, thinks Charles sucks. Is possibly right about that. (view spoiler)

Charles Holland: Flora's fiance. Is upstaged by everyone else. Thinks the best way to deal with a vampire is to meet him by himself at midnight in order to duel him, despite knowing that Varney can kick everyone's ass usually. Has the personality of a block of wood, but this one is varnished. I forget if he shoots Varney. (view spoiler)

Admiral Bell: Aka the A_____l. Likes to say D_____d and D____ a lot. He's Charles's uncle, who gets drawn in when Marchdale tries to get him to drive Charles away by telling him Charles is going to marry a vampire's victim. Bell is too stupid for this plan to work.

Bell is...well. He's this pompous caricature of an admiral who brings life to the book only because he takes no nonsense from anyone save Jack Pringle, his sort of butler/seaman past crewmate. Starts out hilarious, gets annoying fast. He also shoots Varney, or tries to. Varney insulting him and manipulating him is the highlight of the book. Jack Pringle telling him repeatedly to go to hell is the second.

Jack Pringle: Imagine Sam Weller from the Pickwick papers, and this is him. He and Bell have this weird bromance going on, where they insult each other horribly but can't live without each other. Manages to mangle the word Vampyre into Wamphighter on a frequent basis. He doesn't shoot Varney, I think, but mostly because he gets drunk or runs away when important things happen.

He actually has a personality because he knows Bell and keeps bringing up the past, and feels more like a real character. The naval banter between the two is well done, and though it too gets tiring, it can pick the book up sometimes.

Dr. Chillingworth: He is not a character, he is more a role and a plot point. His role is to be an absurd skeptic of vampyres. (view spoiler) Then he just shows up when things happen.

The Mob. They count as a character in composite, and are actually pretty decent characters in singular too. All I have to say is dear God, do not piss off an English mob. The cliché of a horror book mob is that they are ineffectual and often comic relief, but this mob is real, legitimately dangerous, and even a little chilling. Here's some of what they do:

- burn down Varney's house.
- burn down the Bannerworth estate.
- kill an innocent man(!) who was just in the wrong place. It's actually horrific, because the guy tries to flee and fight, and is just borne down by numbers and killed.
- use actual tactics (!) like dispersing so soldiers can't get them and reforming elsewhere, rushing all the entrances to Varney's manor at once, and show an incredible amount of strength and courage.

-chase the hell out of Varney and actually bring him to heel a few times.

This is how bad they are: the heroes actually help Varney to escape the mob a few times. The mob doesn't shoot Varney, but they beat the crap out of him, and throw bricks at him.

Varney the Vampire: He's the only reason to read this. In his own way he's superior to Dracula. While Dracula only shows an animal cunning, Varney is an educated nobleman who has a razor-sharp wit and a nobless oblige nature. He's tall, and a little terrifying yet vulnerable: Varney can be revived from death if moonbeams touch him, but he can be fought and hurt by normal means. His first appearance is frightening, but sadly he devolves as a character as they try to explain him away. (view spoiler)

He manages to dominate any scene he is in, and you sympathize more with him than the heroes. He tries to use terror and guile first, and violence last, although he is very effective at the latter too. If this book was the length of Dracula and better edited, he would be an interesting character. Sadly though, the plot drags him down, too. He gets shot, a LOT.

The Plot:

There isn't one.

Or rather that it changes or gets distracted so often that it doesn't matter. As soon as the admiral is announced, it all gets shot to hell as the author throws everything including the kitchen sink in there: miniature stories just told by the characters to take up space, focusing on peripheral people like the mob (which works hilariously well, surprisingly-the mob takes no crap and likes to heckle people) or an unnamed vampyre who just shows up asking for Varney and just gets dispatched by some herdsman without ever seeing him. This book is the length of ten novels, and the author frantically crams things in day to day it seems.

The Writing: It can work, but not usually. Dialogue is great, and sometimes he can evoke real emotion, but just sparingly.

The Verdict: Yeah, don't bother.

This book demands to be abridged. This is probably the only book that would lose nothing and gain by doing so. It's a tremendously long read that you will skim by the end, and not pleasurable enough to do so. It doesn't evoke horror much at all, and goes all over the place with mostly bland characters and no idea of a plot except what it can stuff in there continuity be damned.

There is some fun to be had in reading this. Everyone in one breath dreads Varney, and in the next are trying to murder him in the face with everything. Varney insults the hell out of people and fights often heroically against insurmountable odds. The admiral and Jack either need to get married or fight at paces with pistols. It's very mockable, and at times it can be entertaining. But good lord, there is so much padding and crap that all the good moments get drowned out by the sheer length of the book.

Even for its historical value, it isn't worth the slog. If you read it, it's a good book to make you fall asleep by. You'll never, ever get to the end in one sitting, and it can be pretty good in random chapters. But you are't

missing a thing by skipping this, even if you like vampires so much you own vampire underwear. Or are a vampire.
