

BLACK SHADOW MOON

A Novel

By

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SAMPLE PAGES

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"And no marvel, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light."

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Prologue

Whitby, England
1895

The cargo hold contained a crypt-like darkness, a cold, endless, blackness so powerful that the glow from the single lantern was squeezed to dimness as if by a huge, unseen hand. The sound of metal dully ringing against metal sent a pair of rats scurrying across a shallow pool of foul seawater accumulated at the bottom of the hold.

In the middle of the hold, a man worked with a tangled assemblage of ropes and pulleys, straining to secure them around a large wooden box. The tackle gear disappeared through the gaping main hatch framed less than two feet above his head. The man, a seaman, worked skillfully but with an abrupt urgency. The lantern light caught the frost of his breath puffing in quick, short bursts.

In spite of the piercing chill, sweat beaded around the seaman's brow, trickling the oily dirt on his face down his cheeks. The single thought pulsing through his brain was to finish this, a job thrust on him through the bad luck of being the newest man to sign onto this schooner's crew. The newest of what was left of the crew, he thought, a fresh wave of fear flooding over him.

With great relief the seaman secured the final rope in place and shouted up the open hatch in his native Romanian, "They're fast. Haul away."

Not wanting to touch the thing any more than necessary, he reluctantly kept the large box from swinging as it lurched up off the floor and moved towards the hatchway above.

On deck, the light from a few scattered lanterns was of little comfort. The fog, unusually thick, rolled across the deck and around the ship with unearthly fluidity. The ship's mate, Russian by birth, supervised as two Romanian hands strained at the ropes raising the box out of the hold.

The moment the box left enough space, the seaman below scrambled out of the hold. His sudden movement distracted one of the men on the ropes. The man's grip faltered and the box suddenly dipped a full two feet at one end. He quickly reapplied the proper amount of tension but drew an angry and frightened glare from the seaman on the other rope. "Hold it steady, you fool," he hissed in Romanian, unable to keep the panic from his voice.

"I've got it. Just swing it over. Quickly!" the first man replied.

The brief exchange proved too much for the Russian mate who took a quick step forward and snarled in adequate Romanian, "Shut up, both of you. Just shut up and work!" The mate glanced nervously up at the afterdeck where the captain, a fellow Russian, watched silently.

The captain stood near the wheel; his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his wool great coat. He was a large man, nearing his forty-ninth birthday, once muscular but now beginning to go soft around his broad middle. He was not as certain as his crew about the true nature of their misfortune during this last crossing, but he was equally relieved to be rid of this cargo.

They had sailed from Varna, on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, down the Danube, arriving in Whitby, England only a few hours before. It was normally a routine voyage the captain had made countless times, mainly carrying cargo, and on occasion, a passenger or two. But this passage had proven to be far from routine.

The hands swung the derrick's boom arm supporting the wooden box over the rail. A superstitious lot, the captain thought; most seamen were. He knew himself to be the rare exception.

Still, the captain reluctantly admitted to himself that he had many unanswered questions about the events of this trip. The port authorities would undoubtedly ask the same questions of him. They would want answers that he still did not have. What would he say? Would they blame him? The ship was under his command and the welfare of the crew was his responsibility.

Two dock workers guided the box into position over a waiting freight wagon. The side panel of the wagon bore the name of the freight company; *Carter, Paterson & Co., London*. The wagon was hitched to a hulking MacLaren steam traction engine, its funnel streaming wisps of smoke that were immediately consumed by the clouds of thick mist.

The dock hands manhandled the load onto a stack of similar boxes already resting in the wagon bed.

The engine driver helped the two dock men pull a tarpaulin over the load and tie it down. He then climbed into the cab of his great machine. The tractor hissed and shuddered as the driver opened the throttle, and with a violent lurch, began to move slowly forward. Smoke billowed from the funnel as the tractor rumbled across the pier with its load. Soon the machine faded away into the fog and darkness.

The captain dragged himself back towards his cabin to collect his duffel. Normally, when his ship docked in the middle of the night, he would be content to sleep in his cabin berth until morning. But this was one night he would look forward to sleeping in the village. He had little doubt that his crew would do the same.

Chapter 1

His strides were long but unhurried as he moved along the busy avenue the English referred to as *The Strand*. His dark, empty eyes were fixed ahead of him, but he saw everything, he saw all of them. The tobacco shop clerk taking in a sidewalk sign in preparation of closing. An open carriage passing him on his right, the middle-aged couple inside engaged in a heated discussion about some romantic indiscretion. Heading towards him through the shadows, a scullery maid stayed timidly close to the buildings as she hurried home from her place of work.

He saw them all; he felt them all. He sensed their hearts beating and the blood coursing through their veins. He sensed their strengths, and he keenly sensed their weaknesses.

London was a large city, something he was not used to. It had been a very long time since he had been among such a large populace. The village was more hospitable to him, more home-like. It was wise to have put in there first.

Certainly, the city crowds enabled him to move among them practically invisible. He walked largely unnoticed, with those nearby aware of him, but not really seeing him. On the other hand, he was on foreign land in a foreign place with unfamiliar customs. It would be wise to use some degree of caution as he grew more familiar with the country.

There was much to learn about this place, and learn he would. It was a point of survival and he had been a master of survival for countless years.

He turned onto Wellington Street and in a short time was standing across the way from his destination. The light glowing from the Lyceum Theater was brighter than any other building on the block. This phenomenon was due to the new electrical light and the luminance assaulted him. It streamed into the street jammed with elegant coaches and hansom, all of them disgorging a collection of London's elite. He watched as royalty, socialites and celebrities made their way between the six Grecian columns and into the theater foyer.

Large, dramatically illustrated posters proclaimed *Othello* as the season's opening presentation. The entertainment was of no interest to him. He was here for the woman. From this vantage point he did not see her, but he knew she was there, or would arrive shortly. Perhaps she was inside already. No matter. He stepped off the curb and made his way across Wellington towards the theater.

Chapter 2

Having completed dressing in the evening clothes he always kept in his office, Bram Stoker stepped into the Lyceum's dim, lower passageway. The theater was in the process of being wired for electricity. The main floor and auditorium was already done but the lower levels still utilized gas lamps. He walked quickly down the shadowy corridor and up the stairs leading to the main floor.

At age forty-five, Stoker was of medium build, with his physical strength only slightly surpassed by the force of his personality. His auburn hair, once a full red when he was younger, was carefully combed. A mustache and neatly trimmed beard, both more red than auburn, and already streaked with gray, covered a strong jaw. On more than one occasion, principally new acquaintances had remarked on the deep, piercing quality of his eyes.

The stairway delivered Stoker backstage, to the rear of the stage itself. He offered a familiar nod to the old doorman, seated at his small high desk just inside the stage door, and then waded into the flurry of what society disdainfully referred to as *theater people*. Cast members and extras already in costume were reciting lines or heading towards the stage. The rest were hurrying towards the wardrobe rooms, dodging busy stagehands maneuvering set pieces and props.

Stoker spotted the Lyceum's stage manager, Harry Loveday, in the wings signing a purchase order for a young clerk. Loveday, in

his fifties, was a theater veteran and had been with Sir Henry since well before Stoker joined the Lyceum. Stoker recalled the clerk's name to be Benton.

"Curtain's up in twenty-five minutes," Loveday greeted.

"Anything I need attend to?"

Loveday shook his head. "Everything's been going quite smoothly."

Stoker nodded his approval, then hurried on towards the front of the theater. Benton relaxed noticeably as he moved away. "You can always set your watch by him," he observed.

"Right on schedule, as always," Loveday agreed.

In the foyer Stoker began to greet the celebrities and dignitaries that invariably attended Lyceum opening night performances. He found himself energized by the power, fame and talent carried so comfortably by these select individuals.

Of all his duties as general manager of the Lyceum, he enjoyed this particular responsibility most of all. Stoker knew his talent and ability was just as keen as the Lyceum's more illustrious patrons. In some cases, he was certain his abilities surpassed them but he certainly wasn't viewed as belonging to their coterie.

Stoker knew he could keep company with Irving's friends as much as he liked, but they were just that, Irving's friends. They all viewed him as Sir Henry Irving's business manager, an employee. It didn't matter that he and Irving were close friends as well as business associates.

Stoker felt a relentless longing to belong to this group. He was determined that one day he would walk beside them, not behind them. He was certain that one day he would be included within their circle. He had been toying with ideas for a new book. Perhaps it would prove to be his vehicle to notoriety.

The first person he spotted across the room was Bernard Shaw, looking as sour as usual. Shaw participated in an unspoken feud with Irving by writing biting reviews of Irving's productions. Irving responded by making it his habit never to read them.

Once Stoker had smoothed Shaw's feathers the best he could, he roamed about offering greetings to some of the Lyceum's more affluent patrons. He happened to be walking past the main doors when he walked William Gilbert. He was known better to the public as W.S. Gilbert, who with Arthur Sullivan, wrote and produced the cleverest musical productions currently in the British theater.

While catching up with Gilbert about his latest production, a large, robust man in his early forties approached through the crowd. His movements were expansive; his broad chest appeared to almost strain the pearl studs of his formal wear and there was a sense of power in his stride as if he were quite athletic. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle always captured attention when he entered a room.

Stoker could not recall ever before seeing Doyle at any Lyceum opening performance. But he was not surprised to see him at this one for he had personally extended the invitation to the author.

Doyle stopped just behind Gilbert, smoothing out a full mustache, waxed on the ends, while impatiently waiting to be acknowledged. Noticing Stoker's gaze wander, Gilbert turned to see what his friend was looking at. "Sir Arthur," he exclaimed warmly.

"William, how are you, and how's that scoundrel you write with doing?" Doyle asked, his voice vigorous.

"I'm doing reasonably well, considering I'm miserably unhappy with the wretched piece we're trying to finish up. And I'd venture to say Arthur's feeling about the same."

"Well, I don't mean to interrupt," Doyle said. "I just wanted to pay my respects."

"You're not interrupting at all," assured Gilbert. "I so enjoyed your last installment in *The Strand*," Gilbert complimented his friend.

"A modest effort, but thank you," Doyle responded.

Gilbert laughed. "That from the most successful author in England."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

As Doyle and Gilbert exchanged pleasantries, Stoker happened to look towards the far entrance in time to see his wife enter the lobby. Florence Stoker looked beautiful in a clinging formal gown of deep green silk. Accompanying Florence was her dearest friend, Lucinda Westen, also looking lovely in scarlet silk.

Since Stoker's position invariably demanded his presence at the theater long before curtain, Lucinda often accompanied Florence when she chose to attend a performance. Lucinda had been

widowed three years past and was usually available, as well as eager, for any social activity. Stoker found her a preferable companion for his wife to the many men who would gladly offer their services.

Both in their mid-thirties, the women made a striking pair. Florence was green-eyed with raven-hair and pearl white skin. Lucinda was blonde with a somewhat darker complexion.

Stoker was just turning his attention back to Doyle and Gilbert when an older gentleman suddenly appeared beside Lucinda. He was tall with iron-gray hair, dressed in dark evening clothes. Lucinda appeared quite happy to see him and quickly included Florence in their conversation.

Stoker attempted to get a better view through the crowd but it proved difficult. Florence smiled warmly at the stranger, perhaps too warmly, as he greeted her with a curt bow. After a few more moments of pleasantries, he accompanied the two women as they walked towards the nearest entrance to the auditorium.

The women disappeared through the doorway but the stranger paused. It seemed to Stoker it was if he were listening for something. Then he turned and looked briefly at Stoker, his eyes dark and intense. And then he was gone, swallowed up in the throng of people making their way into the auditorium.

Stoker suddenly became aware of Gilbert using his name.

"You know, Bram here does a good deal of writing himself, Arthur."

"Just short stories so far," added Stoker, turning his focus back to the conversation.

"Yes, *The Waters Mou*," said Doyle. "I found it admirable."

Stoker strained not to show his pride. Doyle had read one of his stories. "High praise, indeed, sir."

"Not at all." Doyle appeared to suddenly grow impatient. He glanced towards the auditorium entrance and said, "Well, I'd better find my seat. Thank you for the invitation tonight, Mr. Stoker. And William, let's get together soon for a whiskey."

Before Gilbert could answer, an older, moneyed couple approached Doyle, blocking his path to the auditorium.

"Good evening," said the man to Doyle. "We just couldn't pass up the opportunity to meet you."

Trying her best not to gush, the man's wife blurted out, "Goodness. Mr. Sherlock Holmes, himself."

Doyle's face darkened noticeably as he glared at the hapless woman. "My name, *madam*, is Arthur Conan Doyle." With a final nod to Gilbert, Doyle stepped around the couple giving the impression he had never even seen them, and entered the auditorium.

Chapter 3

The moment Gilbert said his good-byes, Stoker hurried into the auditorium. He made his way down the aisle, still clogged with patrons slow to find their seats or just pausing to greet one another.

There she was, Florence, standing at the end of a row chatting with an older couple he did not recognize. There was no sign of Lucinda or the stranger.

"There you are," he said, as the older couple headed away towards their seats. "I thought I saw you in the lobby." He bent to kiss her.

"Ah. Careful not to muss," Florence warned, coolly offering him her cheek. He kissed her lightly.

Stoker was aware that his wife was considered cold, and even unapproachable, by many of their more casual acquaintances. Florence was certainly cautious, and was a bit too conscious of social status to suit him, but he knew her to be far from cold.

"I thought I saw you come in with Lucinda," he commented, surveying the crowd.

"You did. She's gone off somewhere with her charming friend."

"The gentlemen I saw you speaking with." He was certain that he saw Florence blush slightly.

"She seems quite taken with him," Florence added.

"I should enjoy meeting him."

"Well, I don't know where they've gone off to," Florence responded. "But they'll certainly be back soon. Lucinda hates to miss the curtain."

Stoker quickly checked his watch. "Which is only a few minutes away," he said. He looked again for Lucinda and her *friend*, but saw no sign of them. He couldn't delay any longer.

"I should really get to my seat, then," Florence said.

"I'll see you after." Stoker took her hand in his and squeezed gently, then hurried towards the stage access door at the front of the auditorium.

Stoker caught up to Henry Irving, already made up and costumed, in the wings. The actor was engaged in one of his frequent contests of the will with Walter Collinson, his competent valet of many years. Harry Loveday stood nearby watching with quiet amusement. In spite of the questionably serious bickering, Irving still managed to keep one practiced, critical eye on the stage, currently set as a street in Venice, as it underwent final preparations for the first act.

Irving was a tall, fastidious man. His height combined with longish hair and lean features presented quite an imposing effect. As he came to know his friend better, Stoker realized that all of it was carefully cultivated. The look, along with every move Sir Henry made was calculated to command maximum attention. On stage he was certain to wear his inner courage and large ego like a uniform. Offstage and out of the public eye, he tended to be somewhat effete.

Irving was generally unhappy unless he was the eye of the storm in some minor crisis before walking on stage. Tonight's crisis apparently involved some issue with his costume.

"Hurry. Oh, won't you hurry," Irving whined.

"Just hold still," snapped back Collinson. "I can't do a thing with you twisting around like that."

Irving noticed Stoker approaching. "Bram," Irving puled. "Where have you been?"

Stoker did his best to display the appropriate amount of concern. "Is there some problem, Sir Henry?" he asked.

"Only that I should have replaced Collinson years ago," Irving replied, not meaning a word of it. "A simple bit of costume dressing seems to be beyond him."

Collinson rolled his eyes and continued to work, appreciating that Sir Henry had stopped his moving about since Stoker's arrival.

"You always make such a convincing Othello," Stoker complimented, taking in Irving's costume and makeup.

"I should, after all these years, shouldn't I? But how can anyone expect me to be properly prepared when I'm assaulted by last minute emergencies?" Irving asked, not really expecting an answer.

"You'll be fine. You're always the professional," replied Stoker. "And you bloody well know it since *you* create the emergencies."

"And on the topic of emergencies, please tell me you've secured the right play to open next season, something from the classics."

Stoker sighed. "We've been through and through this. We need a property with the greatest box office potential. And at this point, all we're doing is exploring the possibilities so there's really nothing to be concerned about."

"But his material is so common," Irving snapped.

"It can't do any harm to talk to the man, and the next season is still many months away."

"But we must have a good play. It's the opening spot."

"More importantly, we must have a theater in which to present a play."

"Oh, you're not going to start with that financial rubbish again, are you?"

"The Lyceum does a steady business, but purchasing the lease left us low on capital. Let's just hope the press doesn't get onto it."

"We can't have that," replied Irving, alarmed at the thought. "It's not their business. We need a play—"

"We need a play that'll do business," interrupted Stoker.

Irving winced. "Oh, but Sherlock Holmes?"

"We can tolerate the fact his stories have outsold every author in England. It'll bring in a tidy business."

"It's true, sir," Loveday commented. "I've read them all."

"I, as well," added Collinson. "Quite entertaining, really."

Irving fixed an icy gaze on both men, and then gave a sigh of surrender to Stoker. "Alright, alright. We must pursue it, I suppose. But he mustn't know we need him."

"Eight o'clock, sir," Loveday quietly reported to Irving.

The actor offered them all a final, dismissive nod and moved closer to the edge of the wings, focusing his attention on the stage. His character did not appear until scene two, but Sir Henry made it a practice to scrutinize the first scene of all his plays whether he was in it or not. He said it helped him gauge how the audience was responding.

Loveday gave the cue and the curtain went up. The stage manager shook his head in disbelief, leaning in close to Collinson. "Sir Henry more concerned with having no play than no money," he whispered.

Collinson smiled. "Henry Irving without a role to play. Who would he be *then*?"

Both men noticed the look of disapproval on Stoker's face and quickly went about their business.

Stoker moved to a location in the wings where he could see the audience. There was Florence, sitting in her regular seat in the third row near center stage. Lucinda was now seated next to her. He scanned the theater, row by row and finally found him. The tall gentleman was sitting on the aisle, several rows behind Florence and Lucinda.

It was difficult to see make him out in the darkness, but one thing was obvious, the man was not looking at the stage. His eyes were fixed unwaveringly on the two women. Or was he looking just

at Florence? Stoker couldn't be sure. Stepping back into the shadows of the wings, he neither liked nor understood the uneasy feeling growing within him.

Chapter 4

The performance went on flawlessly, and the audience enthusiastically received Irving and his leading lady, Ellen Terry. A talented performer, Ellen Terry possessed a radiant beauty, and the ability to immediately charm everyone who met her.

In the moments following the final curtain, Stoker happened to see Ellen with Sir Henry alone backstage. They were standing in the shadows behind the rear draperies, facing each other and talking softly.

It was long rumored that Sir Henry Irving and Ellen Terry were lovers off the stage as well as on. Stoker was relatively certain the rumors were true. However, the rumors remained only rumors. Sir Henry lived his private life with fastidious discretion.

As the two actors stepped closer to each other Stoker turned away, giving them their privacy. More distracted than he cared to admit, he walked towards the front of the theater to find his wife.

Stoker found Florence, waiting alone for him in the lobby. Apparently, Lucinda had already left, her gentleman *friend* inviting her for a late supper. He had assured Florence that he would also escort Lucinda safely home. Not certain whether to feel relieved or irritated, Stoker escorted his wife to the opening night festivities.

As was his custom, Irving hosted a lavish, opening night party in the Beefsteak Room. The space for years had served as the Lyceum's lumber room. Irving ordered it redecorated, then had it stocked with champagne, brandy, and fine wines. He even brought in his own chef to complete making the room the pivot of his social life.

Large and Gothic, the Beefsteak Room was crowded with the play's cast and the Lyceum's most important patrons. A large banquet table stocked end to end with food and drink occupied the center of the room. Whistler's portrait of Irving as Philip the Second was one of the more imposing paintings hanging on the oak paneled walls.

Irving soon found Stoker. He casually pointed a long, thin finger towards Doyle at the far end of the room, indulging a large glass of claret while chatting with Edward, Prince of Wales. "So, you invited him to the party as well as the performance?"

"Edward? Certainly," Bram responded, holding his smile in check.

"You know very well who I mean," Irving snapped.

"The point is to make him feel welcome, include him as a friend."

Irving continued to stare sourly at Doyle across the room.

"Look at it as a negotiating tactic," Stoker added.

"We'll see," Irving replied. He abruptly moved away, returning to his guests.

It wasn't long before Irving was called on for a toast. He gestured for Stoker, Florence and Ellen Terry to join him in front

of the huge hearth, its fire burning briskly. The room quieted and Irving raised his glass. "Let's raise our cups to the new season. May it be overflowing with memorable performances."

"And substantial profits," added Stoker lightly. The room filled with laughter. Stoker slipped his arm around Florence and gently pulled her closer.

Chapter 5

The Stokers slipped out of the party early and made their way home to Number 27 Cheyne Walk. It was a lovely street of redbrick Queen Anne and Georgian houses, tree-lined and quiet, running along the north bank of the Thames at Chelsea.

Stoker found the hansom ride home very pleasant in that Florence was unusually affectionate. She was not generally patient with public displays of affection, but tonight, at the party, she had allowed his arm around her waist. And in the hansom she sat close to him on the leather bench, her thigh pressed up against his, her head resting against his shoulder.

Now, alone in their bedroom, preparing for bed, Stoker admired his wife. Her beauty could be a source of torture to him. Florence feared "being bloated with pregnancy" which resulted in their intimate unions being few and carefully controlled. As much as he would like them to have a child, he found himself able to forgive this extreme vanity. He loved her, and his wife possessed many other wonderful qualities. At any rate, it usually was not a good idea to allow admiration of his wife's beauty to lead to any physical stimulation.

Watching as Florence removed her dress and stepped behind her dressing screen, Stoker decided to direct his mind to other matters. "So, what about Lucinda and this gentleman friend of hers?"

"Oh, I don't know," Florence answered from behind the screen. "His name is Vlad."

"Vlad?" Stoker pulled off his shirt and hung it in the armoire.

"That's the only name I heard her call him. Eastern European, I think Lucy said." Florence reappeared from behind the screen, now wearing a silk nightdress. "He's an aristocrat in his own country. Some kind of prince, I think."

Florence smiled absently as she talked about the man. Stoker could tell that the stranger's lineage impressed her deeply. "How did she meet him?" he asked.

"They met on holiday in Whitby. I mean Lucy met him while she was on holiday in Whitby. I don't know how, exactly." Florence removed the pins from her hair and the dark waves fell around her shoulders. She sat down at her dressing table and began stroking the brush through her hair.

"Very attentive of him, to follow her to London," he said, thoughtfully.

"I don't know that he did. She was surprised to see him tonight."

"They just happened to have theater tickets for the same night? Quite a coincidence," Stoker mused. He slipped out of his trousers, folded them sharply and draped them over the back of a nearby chair.

"I'm sure she probably mentioned the theater to him at some point. At any rate, she was happy to see him, and I'm glad. She's been alone long enough," Florence said.

"You think it's like that, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know. She could do worse than a prince, though, I should think. I just want to see her happy." Florence put the brush down on the table and gazed into the mirror. "Can you imagine, Lucy meeting a prince on her holiday in Whitby? It's all so mysterious and romantic."

Florence's voice grew soft and her eyes distant as she spoke about the stranger. Stoker was certain he didn't like it.

"He's so charming, so commanding," she continued. "And there's something else. Some kind of, I don't know, a kind of strength there."

"He seemed to make quite an impression," Stoker remarked, not certain of how he should react. He took his nightclothes from the armoire.

Florence suddenly turned and looked at him. "It seems like ages since we were last in Whitby. Remember the walks we'd take along the cliffs, the sea air? We used to have such lovely times there." She rose from the table and came to him, taking his hands in hers. His nightclothes fell to the floor.

Stoker smiled, sharing her memories. "It has been some time, hasn't it?"

"We should plan to go back, sometime soon. You could find time to get away, couldn't you, Brammie?"

He gently pulled her to him. "I remember one of our trips there, in particular. Our first holiday after we were married, he said, his voice dropping to a whisper." Florence looked up at him and moved closer. He could feel the warmth of her body against

him. "That storm moved in, kept us in for two days, and two nights," he added.

She smiled. "It was freezing, and all that rain."

"That feather bed kept us warm enough."

Florence tightened her arms around him. He felt her hips pressing against him, closer than before. He did not expect this response from her. "I can still remember how it felt to touch you. The warmth of you, the heat of you," he managed to murmur.

She moaned softly and he could feel her pushing firmly against him. He kissed her, softly at first. She responded and together they transformed the kiss into something deeper.

They pulled each other towards the bed. He was still caught off guard by her passion and proceeded somewhat tentatively, but in moments she lay beneath him, making her willingness clear.

As he moved in her, Florence pulled him down close to her. He felt her lips move across his throat, lingering there. She had never done this before, at least not quite this way, and the sensation excited him.

He raised himself up, and looking down at her took in every detail of her beauty. He had rarely seen such sensuality in his wife, such lust. They were both soon overwhelmed and focused intently on each other. As they finished, Stoker was fearfully certain of one thing; his wife was not making love to *him*.

Chapter 6

He gazed at the woman, Lucinda Westen, as he roamed about her bedroom. She reclined peacefully on a settee next to the window, her eyes open but unfocused, distant. The quavering shadows from the single gas lamp crawled across her lovely face. She would remain this way as long as it suited him.

The woman of course accepted his offer to escort her home from the theater. She had been totally enthralled with him since their first meeting in the village. He never had any true intention of supper and claimed weariness, asking if she would excuse him and allow him to simply see her safely home. She began to coax him for the meal but he was able to end it with a brief assertion of will. The same strength of will brought him a necessary invitation into her home when she was hesitant to extend one on her own.

He marveled at his power, at how tractable they generally were. It enabled him to accomplish many things. It was the key to many doors.

Her personal possessions were scattered about the room, each giving him some sense of her as he gazed at them or touched them. She had told him of her husband, how he died of a sickness of the lungs some years ago. There was a portrait of them both on the dresser. It was the only picture in the room; the woman had no family.

She was convenient to him when they met in the village, but now another course of action was forming in his mind. She might

still be helpful to him, but he found himself drawn more to the Stoker woman. She was strong and aloof and he was aware he faced a challenge in overcoming her defenses. He sensed that she might prove to be more useful, as well.

He moved to the settee and sat down beside Lucinda Westen. Undisturbed, she held her distant gaze. His hand rested on her knee; he moved it gently up the length of her thigh. Her breathing deepened at the touch of his hand. He could feel the silk of her gown beneath his fingers but nothing beyond that. There was neither heat nor chill for him. There was neither joy nor sadness. There was no love, and no hate. What he had now were the memories of those sensations, distant echoes of feelings and emotions that once were.

It was the stir of power that was the strongest of these echoes. He was once ruler of his homeland with every life there subject to his mastery. His rule had been too short and his sovereignty had faded away long ago. Now his influence over the lives he encountered was the source of satisfaction that fed him.

He gazed impassively at the woman. Perhaps she could be useful as a means to draw the Stoker woman closer. And in achieving that end she could satisfy one of his more immediate needs.

He reached behind her and unfastened the clasps of her gown. Her smooth, golden skin unveiled as he pulled the fabric down, the silk gathering at her waist. He touched the back of his hand to her cheek and slowly moved it downward across her throat and bare

shoulders. He lowered himself to her and her flesh easily gave way to him.

Chapter 7

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had to admit that he had enjoyed last night's production of *Othello*. The applause had been loud, long, and well deserved. Louise would have enjoyed it, Doyle thought.

He couldn't remember the last time he had been to a social event in the company of his wife. She had scarcely been out of the house since the consumption began eating away her body. He missed her company far more than he missed the money that had disappeared into the bottomless pit of doctors, treatments, and extra household help.

The money Doyle *did* miss was lost in the Westheath development situation. That money he missed greatly and he could only blame himself. He should have looked into it more before committing his funds.

It was all spilled milk, however, and the puddle led Doyle to where he was now, in a hansom moving once again towards the Lyceum Theater and his meeting with Henry Irving. He badly needed the revenue that would result from this business.

Doyle would have to swallow his pride and do business with the man. Stoker had originally contacted him about his play, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and discussions with Irving had barely begun. But Doyle could already see that the real negotiations were going to be intolerable; Irving was so unquestionably full of himself. He simply was incapable of seeing that the other fellow had requirements, as well.

It was fortunate that Stoker was involved, Doyle thought as the hansom pulled to a stop in front of the theater. He generally managed to bring a sense of reason into Irving's side of things. Doyle stepped out and paid the driver. As the cab drove away he checked his watch. He was directly on time, as usual.

Chapter 8

Stoker was working at his desk when Harry Loveday knocked twice, opened the door and stepped inside the office. He had been at it all morning, going over the company ledgers, doing his best to manage the Lyceum's dodgy cash flow. And he'd had the damndest time trying to keep his mind on it all.

"Bram, sorry," Loveday began.

"What is it?"

"Sir Henry asked me to come down. Sir Arthur's already here. Waiting in the Beefsteak Room."

Stoker leaned back in his chair. "Ah, the meeting, yes. I'll be right up."

"I'll tell Sir Henry," Loveday replied, turning to leave.

"Harry," Stoker called after him.

Loveday turned back, eyebrows raised inquisitively.

"Did you happen to see that rather tall gentleman last night? Dark, gray hair."

"Tall gentleman?"

"He was with Mrs. Stoker and her friend for a time. I first saw him in the lobby."

"I didn't get out to the lobby at all last night. Opening night frenzy, and all."

"I think Mrs. Stoker said his name was Vlad," Stoker pressed. "Thought you might have seen him after the performance."

Loveday shook his head. "No. And I don't know him. Has he been here before?"

"I don't believe he has. I was just hoping you might know something about him."

"Is everything alright?" Loveday asked. "I mean is there something off with the man?"

Stoker shrugged. "Just curious. Tell Sir Henry I'm on my way."

Loveday nodded and hurried out.

Stoker stood, but remained behind his desk, staring blankly down at the mess of papers before him. He was unclear as to what was bothering him and he was unable to dispel the disquiet he felt. What was it about the man?

Managing to shake it all away for the time being, he gathered up his notes for the meeting and hurried towards the stairs.

Chapter 9

Florence awoke still hearing the soothing, accented voice of Lucinda's European friend. She lay in bed trying to make out the words, remaining there much longer than she intended. It was silly of her, she knew. She was married, happily married to a fine man. Still, there was something so intriguing about the European. Well, there was nothing wrong with a little fantasy, she thought, swinging her long legs out of bed.

She saw to her toilet and dressed, and then spent some time with her Bible, as was her morning custom. By the time Florence came downstairs, cook had a simple breakfast waiting for her. A half-hour later she made a casual inspection of the house, issuing instructions to the housekeeper on a few chores she wanted to see done.

She was relaxing in the parlor with a cup of tea when she heard the front bell ring. A minute later, Tilly appeared in the parlor doorway. Tilly had been with them for three years now and Florence found her to be a first-rate maid. "Pardon me, missus, but Miss Lucinda's girl is at the door," Tilly announced.

"Yes?"

"She says she's got to speak with you. Seems a bit out of sorts."

Florence put her cup and saucer down and followed Tilly to the front door. Annie Beth stood on the front step, waiting anxiously. She had been with Lucinda forever and Florence knew

her well. She was indeed, out of sorts. "Annie Beth? What is it?" Florence inquired.

"It's Miss Lucy, ma'am. I haven't been able to get her up," Annie Beth answered.

"You haven't been able to get her up?"

"I went to wake her at 7:30, like always. Knocked on her door but I didn't hear nothin'. I knocked again and heard her say she wanted to sleep a bit more. I could hardly make her words through the door." Annie Beth's words gradually came faster with anxiety, and her voice went up in pitch as she continued. "I waited an hour and tried again. She didn't say a word so I went in this time."

"Very wise," Florence encouraged her.

"She was just lyin' there asleep, still. I shook her a bit, and she woke up, but she it's like she couldn't wake up," Annie Beth explained worriedly.

"What do you mean?" Florence asked.

"I tried pulling back the curtains and she wouldn't let me. Snapped at me, she did, told me to let 'em be. And I tried again, I tried to shake her awake but she just closed her eyes. I told her I thought it best to call the doctor and that upset her, it did. We bickered about it a bit. She wouldn't budge about the doctor but she finally let me come for you. You'll come, won't you, ma'am? She's sure not herself."

Florence glanced past Annie Beth at the hansom waiting at the curb. "Tell the driver to wait another minute. I'll be right along."

Twenty minutes later they arrived at Lucinda's home on Lawrence Street, only a few blocks from Cheyne Walk. Florence dismissed the cab, and now she and Annie Beth stood outside the entrance to Lucinda's bedroom. Not bothering to knock, Florence opened the door and went in. As Annie Beth had reported, the room was dark, the curtains still drawn tight. Lucinda was lying on her back, the covers drawn up to her chin. Her face appeared drawn and troubled in the shadows.

As Florence drew next to the bed, Lucinda uttered a soft, contented moan. "The curtains, please," Florence instructed. Annie Beth pulled them open.

Lucinda immediately moaned in protest as the sunlight streamed across the room. She tossed uncomfortably in the covers, as if trying to throw off some unwelcome swarm of insects. Florence gently gripped Lucinda's shoulders as she sat down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes opened and she tried to shield them from the light. "No. No," Lucinda moaned. "Close them. Close them, please."

Annie Beth immediately moved towards the window. "No," Florence stated firmly. Annie Beth stopped in her tracks. "We won't be closing the curtains, Lucy." Lucinda's eyes slowly focused on Florence and after a moment, it was clear that she recognized her friend. "It's almost noon and they need to be open."

Lucinda moaned again and turned her eyes away from the window. Florence suddenly noticed how pale and drawn her friend

was. She felt her forehead for fever but the skin was cold to the touch. Florence turned to Annie Beth. "Heat up a cup of broth. Bring it up directly."

Annie Beth nodded and hurried anxiously from the room.

Just over an hour later, Florence had Lucinda propped up in bed, goose down pillows supporting her comfortably. Florence had helped her take the broth and she was looking better. Some of her color had even returned, though she still looked quite weary.

"I don't know what got into me," Lucinda fretted. "I still feel so tired."

"Well, you seem better now," Florence observed. "Did you eat a bad spot of meat last night, perhaps?"

Lucinda looked back at her blankly. "I don't think so. I don't really remember."

"You don't remember what?"

"I'm not sure I remember much about last night after the theater."

Florence smiled. "So, that's the affect your nobleman has on you?"

"Oh, Florry, stop it," Lucinda smiled for the first time since Florence had arrived. "He is interesting, isn't he?"

"To say the least." Florence took another careful look at her friend. "Yes, I'd definitely say you're doing better. I'm going home now, but I'll be back to check on you after dinner."

Lucinda reached out and took her hand. "Thank you for coming to my rescue. You're my angel."

Florence gave her friend's hand a gentle squeeze and then turned to Annie Beth. "Keep a close eye on her. And come get me if any need develops."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am," the maid replied gratefully.

With a final, reassuring smile to her friend, Florence left to find a cab.

Chapter 10

Irving, a long cigar in gripped loosely in his hand, was pacing outside the door of the Beefsteak Room when Stoker arrived. "I thought it best to wait for you," he explained coyly.

Against his better judgment, Stoker decided to take advantage of this moment alone with Irving to ask him about Lucinda's foreign friend.

"Never heard of the man," Irving replied curtly as he opened the door to the Beefsteak Room and entered.

A hearty fire burned in the huge fireplace, and the lamps were turned up to give the room a warm, homelike feel. Stoker watched as the game began again. Doyle and Irving's coolness towards one another vanished in a wave of professionalism.

Doyle rose from his leather wing chair in front of the fire as Irving moved across the room with a warm smile pulling at his thin features. "Ah, Sir Arthur. Good morning."

"Sir Henry."

The two men shook hands as if they were recently reunited long-lost brothers.

"How's your charming wife?" Irving asked. "Louise, isn't it?"

"Yes," Doyle answered with precisely the proper amount of appreciation in his tone. "She's well, thank you. Prefers to stay with the quiet of home when I'm in London on business. Wonderful performance last night. First rate."

"You're too gracious," Irving beamed. A compliment on any of

his performances was something Irving always accepted as sincere.

Collinson entered carrying a tray laden with pastries, fresh butter and white bone china. He set the food on the end of the dining table and then poured tea from a steaming pot already waiting on the massive mahogany buffet.

Doyle completed piling several pastries on his plate before the last teacup was filled. "Nothing else, thank you, Walter," Irving said. Collinson left the room, closing the door behind him.

The first sign that the cordiality of the meeting would probably fade came with Sir Henry nervously pacing past the food and picking up tidbits with his fingers instead of using a plate.

Doyle sank into his chair near the fire with his plate. "Well, Sir Henry," he sighed, setting his teacup on the small table beside the chair, "Why don't we get right to the business at hand." The second sign, to be sure.

Stoker watched as the professional charm between Sir Henry and Sir Arthur transformed into a mutual wariness.

Irving appeared thoughtful as he continued to slowly pace. "Hmm, yes. Well, actually... I, I'm just unable to picture myself as this, this Sherlock Holmes fellow."

Doyle's entire body stiffened. "Oh?" he responded.

"It's just, I've built my career on Shakespeare, the classics. It's been my policy to present only the finest possible entertainment to our patrons. But a play about a policeman?"

"A policeman," Doyle responded hotly. "We're discussing 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,' not some news column about a south

end bobby."

"Of course not," Sir Henry sounded contrite.

"If this is a way to avoid meeting my price..."

"You mustn't think that, Sir Arthur," Stoker hastily interjected. "We're still working out the finances. It's a bit dicey since you require more than the standard royalties."

"It's been a bloody long while since I've accepted less."

"But I'm still not convinced your play is something I should undertake. Especially for a long run," Sir Henry continued.

Stoker could hardly believe Irving said it. Didn't the man understand that they needed Doyle's play? The Lyceum needed the play in order to face its current financial difficulties.

Doyle began to rise from his chair. "If that's the way you see it, I see no reason spending further time trying to change your opinion."

Stoker forcefully gestured towards Doyle. "Sir Arthur, if you please, sit down." Doyle hesitated. "Please."

Doyle reluctantly settled back into the chair, his suspicious eyes boring into Sir Henry. Sir Henry gazed back with a questionable innocence.

"Gentlemen. It's to all our best interests to make this work, is it not? We need this arrangement."

Doyle and Irving remained silent, tentatively eyeing each other. "Very well, then," Stoker continued. "Let me draft something informally. Some guidelines to get us on the right track, if you will. We can meet again later to look over what I've come up with."

Irving sighed in resignation. "Perhaps he's right. Perhaps the only way to move forward is for Bram to take it all in hand."

"I'll look at any reasonable agreement," Doyle said.

"As will I," Irving agreed.

"Then I'll send word just as soon as I have something," Stoker confirmed.

Doyle nodded. "Good." He rose from the chair, obviously still somewhat annoyed by Irving's "policeman" remark.

Irving dropped himself into a nearby chair as Doyle moved towards the door. Stoker made sure to get there first to open it for him. Doyle glanced back at Irving, then back at Stoker. "You highly compensate for his... his being an *actor*," he said.

Irving's eyebrows rose in amusement as the door closed behind Doyle. "Difficult man."