

WHITE TO MOVE

It was a cold, dark underground chamber seemingly abandoned by the ages. The only thing that appeared to be of significance was an open antique coffin filled with earth. On the rear wall, high above it, was a small window opening onto the darkness outside. Under the light of an oil lamp, was an old man dressed in Victorian out-door garments. He was busily laying objects on and around the coffin below it. On the place where a head would lie was a gold communion pyx and near it a metal crucifix. Scattered around were fronds of garlic flowers. From time to time, the man would nervously consult his fob watch and glance up at the window. In his free hand, he held a wooden crucifix. An owl hooted in the distance. He then sat on the stone steps descending into the chamber and seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

Suddenly the chamber got colder. From the door on the left side a vision materialized in a cloud of smoke. It was the cloaked figure of a tall younger man. Seeing the coffin, the figure froze. It surveyed the pyx, the crucifix and the garlic with growing concern. It then turned his handsome but saturnine face towards the man. Gathering himself, he tried to speak slowly and evenly. "Your move I think, Van Helsing?"

"No - it's yours, Dracula."

Dracula calculatingly examined the protected coffin once again. "Hmmm .. let me see now.... The garlic... The crucifix clutched so tightly in your hand.. And the communion wafer in its pyx just where my head should lie. A good move, Van Helsing - I congratulate you. You have moved your pieces well. Checkmate, I presume? "

Van Helsing stood and raised his crucifix defiantly. "This is no game. But if you insist on using such terms then I can tell you that, when the sun rises, your Kingdom will be toppled into the fire where it belongs."

"Ah - but I do insist," hissed Dracula. "It is a game even if I must lose. So please allow me to consider your most interesting gambit at length."

Van Helsing shrugged sardonically. "If you wish."

Suddenly Dracula turned his glowing eyes glance fully on Van Helsing. "Are you afraid of me?"

"I am not afraid of you!" Van Helsing growled defiantly, "for God is on my side!"

Dracula sighed softly. "I.....am afraid..."

Disconcerted, Van Helsing half-raised his head. But then saw the trap in time and hastily averted it again.

A look of anger passed over Dracula's face. Then he controlled himself and spoke with an air of feigned unconcern. He swept his hand over the articles. " Now ... this game... And those pieces. That garland of garlic for example. For all it's strong smell, garlic has the most delicate flowers, has it not? "

"What of it?"

"Such flowers are so very fragile and my hands are so inhumanly strong. Yet they prevent me from going for your throat." Dracula's voice became sardonic. "Why?"

Van Helsing shrugged. "I've no idea...."

"And the crucifix: a nice piece of workmanship"

Van Helsing raised his voice. "It is the image our Savior who ..."

"It is an image cast in cheap nickel silver in a small workshop by a man - possibly an unbeliever," snarled Dracula

"It is a symbol of Salvation..."

Dracula interrupted venomously. "It is a chess-piece. This...is...a....game!"

"I don't understand you."

"Then let me explain ... the rules. I am a force to be feared, am I not?"

"YOU ... are a servant of Satan."

"Quite so: and therefore a force to be feared," Dracula sneered. He threw out his arms. "Yet is it not strange that my Master and I, for all our powers, are constrained by a mere plant; a man-made image of a man pinned to wood and a crumb of bread? Like players in a board game who can only move according to arbitrary, meaningless rules. A strange game - but a game nevertheless."

Van Helsing threw up his fist angrily. "I have told you - this is no game!"

"That is what you believe. But then it is not your game - it is His - your Master's. Dracula's voice became heavy with sarcasm. "It must amuse Him greatly."

"Do not blaspheme against the Lord!"

Dracula gave a dry laugh. "Ah yes your Lord. The White King, I take it?"

"Stop your mockery!" roared Van Helsing. "Do not judge God by your Master's obscene rules - God is all goodness. After all it was He who gave His only begotten Son to be crucified."

"Quite so, Van Helsing, quite so."

"And what do you mean by that?"

Dracula threw out his arms. "Have you ever considered why that, with a God with infinite power and logic: the power to do anything - even resolve impossible paradoxes - should need to do such a thing? Would he need to lower himself to Man's level and demand some arcane and barbaric ritual to placate his egoistical rage?"

"Do not think you can tempt me with your Devil's Advocacy! God does not play dice with Man."

Dracula shook his head in disbelief. "Oh? Was it not your loving God had plagued a man with boils and killed his wife and children - just so he could win a wager with my Master?"

Van Helsing clamped his hands over his ears. "I will not listen to this filth!..... "

"Then take your play-things and go! I am tired!"

"No! I must destroy you!"

Faintly, outside, the bird dawn chorus started. Dracula nervously looked up and saw the early light of dawn through the window. He hung his head in despair and then said, quietly and bitterly "Why? Why must you destroy me?"

"Because you are a creature of darkness ..."

Dracula looked up at the window again and shook his head. "Isn't the moonlight as beautiful as the sun?"

"You prey on us like animals "

"...As you prey on your fellow creatures. Did you dine well tonight, Van Helsing? Pork was it not? Did your house-keeper give a thought for the poor creature as it hung from a hook in the butcher's shop with its entrails ripped out? And was it tender enough even for your blunt teeth?"

Van Helsing shook his head violently. "That was different - it was not of my species."

Dracula glared at him. "And I am not of yours."

Van Helsing threw out his arms. "But we are the superior species..... "

"Can you live for centuries?" growled Dracula, shaking his head. "Can you fly like a bat? Can you pass through locked doors like smoke?"

"God gave us dominion over..."

Dracula took a threatening step forward. "...And Our Lord Satan gave us dominion over you. YOU are necessary for our survival. You..are.. PORK!"

Van Helsing stepped back in fear and crossed himself. "May the Lord preserve us!"

"The Lord may preserve you - when it pleases him. But if he truly wished to protect you he would not have created Satan and he would not have permitted him or me to be loose in the world. But he has and all he has given you for your protection are symbols." Dracula waved his arms over the tokens. "Place your pieces well or you will lose the game!"

"Be quiet!" Van Helsing looked up at the window. Through it was the faint glow of sunrise. He pointed at it.

Dracula followed his gaze. His body slumped in despair. "It seems I am going to die."

"Yes, Dracula, you are. When the sun rises, the world will be rid of you."

Dracula shook his head sadly and sighed. "I have not seen the sun for a long time. For me the moon must suffice."

"You will not see another moon either," crowed Van Helsing, triumphantly.

Dracula raised his head and stared at Van Helsing. "No? But how many will you see? How many years have you left - ten, twenty, perhaps? And then – what?"

"I hope to find Salvation."

"You hope ... "

"I believe!"

Dracula shook his head pityingly. "Ah, yes - Faith. You believe, without material proof, that something will happen after physical death. But then, I have no need for such beliefs. For I know. For I am dead."

"What do you know?" stuttered Van Helsing, nervously.

"I know that there is no Salvation. There is no life after death - except for me and those like me."

Van Helsing spread his arms in disbelief. "But if Satan can give eternal life to those who serve him would not the Lord do anything less for his?"

"Yes He would. You forget that the Lord is infinitely powerful whereas Satan is not. Therefore Satan has needs whereas the Lord has not. I am necessary to my Master's plan whereas you, my friend, are totally expendable."

Van Helsing shook his head violently. "No!"

"But yes. Join me - it's your only chance."

"What? Give my soul to Satan? That would be eternal damnation!"

"Damnation. Damnation, growled Dracula. "It is only a word - like Transylvania. Do you really think that, if my existence was anything like your idea of damnation, I would choose it? Would I volunteer for suffering? If Satan had tricked me and I was now suffering all the agonies of your Hell, do you not think I would now be begging you to drive a stake through my heart? No! Before you came my people and I were happy."

"Happy?" sneered Van Helsing. "An obscene kind of happiness."

"Is it? It is true that we take your blood but we - like you - must survive. But it does not hurt and we seldom kill unless - like you - we are threatened. We do not drink more than our needs for - unlike you - we are not gluttons. And, unlike you, we do not take pleasure in the hunt. It is true I have used a madman to achieve my ends but he was already mad: don't you send the berserk to war? Our faces may look terrible to you but have you seen yours at the height of battle? But if you had seen us at peace - then you might have thought differently. If, one bright moonlight night, you had seen us walking and talking or dancing, you might have mistaken us for spirits out of 'A Mid-Summer's Night Dream'. And said we were beautiful."

"Beautiful? Blood-sucking beasts of prey!"

Dracula shook his head sadly... "Many beasts prey on man from time to time – yet other men dedicate their lives to preserve the very same beasts." He took a step towards Van Helsing and spread his arms imploringly. "Van Helsing - you do not have much time. I do not offer you Paradise but I can offer you an eternity of reasonable contentment. It is the best you can hope for."

Van Helsing stepped backwards and waved his fist. "Keep your offer! Everything you have said is a lie. Your Master is the Lord of Lies!"

Dracula beat his fist against the wall and his voice shook with urgent sincerity. "I have told you the truth. How can my Master be the Lord of Lies if the God's honest truth can be got out of him by simply reversing everything he says? As for myself: I am perfectly happy to tell the truth if suits my purpose. And my purpose is to survive - even if I have to endure your company for ever. Accept my offer!"

"No."

"You fool," shouted Dracula despairingly, "we'll both die. Sooner or later! Trust me!"

"No!"

"Then for pity's sake let me go!"

"NO!"

In the distance, a cock crowed

Dracula slumped back against the wall in defeat. After a while, he raised his head and, with his voice trembling with sad resignation, said "Have you ever loved?"

Van Helsing raised his eyebrows in puzzlement. "Why do you ask me that?"

Dracula rubbed his face as if in pain. "I had a lover once. When I was human."

Van Helsing shook his head in disbelief. "You! Human?"

Dracula stared ahead of him like man trying to see something in the darkness. Then he said, sadly and haltingly "When I was human, I was the High Priest of the Temple of ... of ... " he sighed "I can't quite remember - it is so long ago. There was a woman ... with long raven hair wild and elemental like a gipsy. She could change like the elements: one moment a thunder-storm, the next like radiant sunshine. Her dark eyes seemed to suck the very soul from me. She was that trinity of qualities that no man can resist: a courtesan to test my manhood; a nurturing mother for when I felt lost; a vulnerable wondering child having need of my strength and protection. I fell in love at first glance."

Van Helsing snorted derisively. "Love? Lust!"

"Love? Lust? What is the difference? Which comes first? Yes, it is true that there can be lust without love. Like salt on it's own it can taste strongly and leave a bitter taste in the mouth. But when added to love it loses its own identity and enhances the flavor of the other. It is not destroyed - it becomes something new. I did not understand this until I came to lie with her the first time. I was not aware of lust, or fear of rejection or a need to prove myself. There was no celestial music, no blinding flash of revelation - just a feeling of rightness. It was as if .. as if I had returned after a long journey back to a place I had always known and my soul had softly opened a door to show me my own sleeping child and said 'You are home'. Is that love?"

"I don't know."

"Often, when above me, she would shake her head in an agony of pleasure: tears streaming down her face and say 'Oh why? Oh why cannot we be together like this for ever?'" Sometimes when she was sleeping, I would just gaze down at her: the sweep of her hair, the fall of her lashes, the curve of her cheek. And often she would suck her thumb in her sleep. Can you imagine that, Van Helsing, a grown woman sucking her thumb?" Dracula's voice trembled and he brushed away a tear. "And can you imagine me, a grown man, being reduced to tears at the sight? Is that love?"

Van Helsing took out his fob watch and consulted it. "Time is passing!"

"I loved her more than my life and (as I then believed) immortal soul. Because of my calling, I could not marry her nor could we safely be together. So we made a pact with Satan: our mortal lives apart in exchange for an unknown twilight world together." He raised his head and, with burning eyes, looked at Van Helsing. "IS THAT LOVE?!"

Van Helsing shrugged and said, coldly "I have no lover and no experience of such...love. My love is above such things."

Dracula clutched his head in agony. "But mine is not! Don't take me from her!"

The rising sun struck through the window. Van Helsing pointed to it. "You are wasting your time. Look – the sun is rising!"

Dracula let out a scream. "Please, Van Helsing, let us live!" He leapt despairingly towards the coffin and tried to get into it. As his strength failed, he sank to the floor, clutching convulsively at the coffin's side. It tipped over and he fell to the floor behind it, the earth raining on him. He raised one hand, clawed in agony, in the air above the coffin. "Murderer!" A beam of sunlight struck the pyx and the hand fell.

