

## A Visit to the Countess

The journey was more difficult than I'd expected, and darkness was falling by the time I arrived at the carpark. Although I was late, there was no one waiting. I got out of the car and stretched my legs; there was an unexpected chill in the air, and I'd not taken many paces before everything began stirring. Leaves shuffled in the darkness beneath the trees surrounding the small parking area, which was cut into the edge of a dense wood. And then within seconds the leaves were flying up and the trees were lurching forward and crackling. From silent stillness in so short a time there was such a commotion of wind and trees that I didn't hear the vehicle arrive. I can't say I even noticed its lights – it was there, slowly alongside me, crunching the gravel.

An erratic and reckless driving style on the part of the silent scarfed driver, combined I suppose with the uninsulated noisiness of the landrover and the sudden onslaught of wind, made it seem as if we were hurling ourselves at hell-for-leather speed into endless black gulleys and up steep curving banks and between tempestuous trees that all-but moved aside for us. I could swear for a while we drove up a narrow stream. At one point we crested a steep bank where all foliage fell away, the landrover came to a virtual standstill, and a kind of blue aurora of mist (I suppose it was) rippled below us. Then we plunged back into black chaos. Occasionally over the noisy engine the wind howled like a pack of wolves. Or a pack of wolves howled. After what seemed like ages, ages enough for the torrent of motion to have become mesmeric, suddenly we were still. Solid walls were around us; the faceless driver was shooing me from the car. I took refuge in an arched doorway.

Stepping over the threshold was like entering a separate atmosphere, a coldness, a different weight and sound to everything. She closed the door like a pressure seal. Perhaps time stopped at that instant. All sounds seemed to cease. The house was quiet with dust. It was so silent that I cannot really say she spoke at all: she at most whispered. I'm not even sure she whispered. It was almost as if her thoughts were audible in the tremor of cobwebs, in the generation of dust. The stone staircase, shallow and partly ruinous, rose across bottomless darkness. But the room upstairs to which she led me was lit by a fire.

I began to feel normal again. I ate the food. That the fire warmed me may have been an illusion – in truth a kind of temperaturelessness, a universal unfelt coldness, pervaded the house. Fire and food warmed my spirits, anyway. As I ate, she poured me wine. She had seemed to welcome me graciously with hospitable words, either at the door or on the stairs. Or perhaps both. Her voice was so much part of the house that its moment was as imprecise as its sound, or its location. The fire cast moving lights and shades about the room. I could hear no difference between her voice and her shadow. Except that, now I think about it, she had no shadow. The firelight turned the wine goblet to gold, her fingers as she handed it to me to vines. She seemed to have said that the wine was old; or was it that the house was old? She had invited me to eat, and showed me my bed, and spoken of the late hour and my journey and the dawn, very exactly and courteously – yet I find I cannot write or remember her words; or perhaps it would be more correct to say, if I wrote words they would not convey what I heard, they would not be what she said. If I gave her words, the silence and the timelessness would appear to be broken in a way that they were not, in reality. It was as if the house were speaking to me. No, it was as if the house were thinking, remembering. When she spoke of dawn it was a memory; she was no longer there.

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As I sank into the bed I realised that the fire created the room. There was no sense of walls or boundaries, just blackness beyond the flickering light. It hadn't occurred to me before: it could have been a furnished stage-set within a vast hall, within a vast cavern. I lay in the cool bed – everything was the same, *everything* somehow lacked discernable warmth – and stared upwards, half thinking I might begin to see stars as my eyes adjusted. Instead I saw silence, so far away it was barely perceptible. I remembered – I think I was remembering – that she had spoken of the late hour and my tiredness after my journey. I have a faint impression she spoke of dreams, the dreams that one has in an old house. I dreamed her speaking.

Of course it seemed different in the 'morning'. Surprising, perhaps, that I'd slept well, but I *had*, and until late afternoon. The room *was* large, it *was* tall. To the left of the bed, away from the fireplace, was a wide unfurnished space, ending in tapestries as if it didn't end there at all. The near part of the room was darkly panelled from floor to not far short of an indistinctly distant ceiling. The floor was bare wood. The fireplace was now full of ashes. The vessels I had been eating and drinking from on the table were indeed made of gold. The window was unusually small for so large a room. It looked out on to a narrow rear courtyard and admitted hardly any light. In case you're wondering, a spartan oldfashioned bathroom lay through an open door near the bed. For a time I revised my recollections of the previous evening; I began to feel embarrassed that my journey had so drained me that I must have seemed utterly dreary and disconnected.

The Countess – my host – had said (I think) that I might sleep as long as I liked, and must feel free to go anywhere in the house, so long as the doors were unlocked. And, that she would be away until evening when she looked forward to conversing with me. I'm almost sure 'conversing' was the word, but whatever it was it was, like all her speech, precisely chosen and enunciated, and not at all colloquial. I think the things she'd said the night before passed over me at the time, but I recalled them vividly as I was washing and dressing. I felt a fresh interest in my assignment, and was eager to explore the ancient house (or castle, or whatever it was) to which it had brought me.

It was enormous. Though parts of it were uninhabitable and in ruins. Having slept all day my eagerness to explore was quashed somewhat by the recolonising darkness. The stairs still bridged a fathomless chasm. Arches looming out of shadows lurched up into nothingness. Worn narrow steps cascaded into blackness. Some rooms were richly furnished and carpeted and curtained, and cobwebbed. Some seemed not like rooms at all, just bare vaulted spaces. A few doors were locked. The same indescribable coldness, or lack of temperature, was everywhere; the same silence. I tried at first to memorise the way back, but after a while I gave up. Finally I came upon a room lit with candles, a room that felt inhabited. Its walls were lined with books, and my eyes had grown sufficiently accustomed to the dim light to survey the shelves, noting familiar and unfamiliar names on the leather spines. Many were in Latin, some were in English. They were antique books, I don't recall any that struck me as later than the eighteenth century. The books were old, I seem to have dreamed her saying. I've no idea if she had been there all along, or if she had glided in, as sometimes she seemed to glide, silently, with a brief disruption of dust. I remember a momentary start when I felt her presence, but then her calming whisper dispelling it out of time, as if she'd spoken already. And perhaps she had. The books were old; she had read them all, long ago.

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She wanted me to stay for some weeks, in order to converse, to polish her spoken English (she said). Yet she spoke with perfection and precision. She spoke of an old family, her family; an old people, the proud race from which she hailed; and old blood, she said, on more than one occasion. For there were many such conversations, over succeeding nights, over those weeks. Or else there were many conversations wrapped up in this one night's conversation, as if the speaking (the house's speaking, her blood's speaking) had many layers at once. As if time and sequence were absent from it. Conversation is not what it was. Mostly I was just listening, or hearing, as if entranced; what little I said I said awkwardly, too aloud, too located – in a room swirling with her silent sentences, hypnotic and exact, whether she was there or not.

She became more and more beautiful. I haven't described her appearance, because to be honest on the evening of my arrival I paid it little heed except – and I am quite certain of this – that she struck me as old. Not merely older than I'd expected, but *old*. Her hair as I followed her up the staircase was grey, only reddening a little in the firelight. Her hands as she poured the wine were old hands. But in the library the following night she was younger, almost beautiful. And each night she became more so. Pale in the candlelight of course, but each night she reflected it more smoothly. Eventually her hair was red, her skin was luminous. Her hands reached out, and were no longer old.

She had me write letters. One to my employer reporting the signing of the contracts (which was my chief purpose there). One to my family saying that I must stay. Later there was one to make arrangements for shipping the boxes. They'll want to know what's in the boxes, I said. 'Earth' is what I wrote. Her actual reply was an image of an entire graveyard exhumed, earth and all. She encouraged me to write further letters home. I kept them brief and bland, knowing she would know what was in them. However, after a while I wrote to my employer in shorthand (as best I could) telling him I thought I was possessed by some kind of monster and would never return. She knew of course. I made light of it: even if he could have deciphered my shorthand, I said, it would have seemed so ridiculous he'd have taken it as a joke.

She told me of her people. Her blood was old, she would often seem to say. It was her blood spoke through her. Her ancestors spoke. She told me of wars and conquests, contracts and betrayals, walled-up wives and impaled enemies. I knew the power of charging into battle amidst a stampede of swords and horses, I knew the impotence of being naked and paralysed by nails; the excruciations of the most tortured death, the ecstasies of the most delicious killing. Cold armour weighed upon my back. Warm blood poured over my head. Babies were wrenched from my belly. The stake sank through. Earth was thrown over me. The long agony of time. You would have thought she had lived the lives of all her ancestors for centuries and was cursed with forgetting nothing, and never dying. Night after night the library filled with ghosts, each ghost a name pronounced by her and inhabited by me. Night after night – so it seemed – she poured out her past and I drank. It was as if my lady, my beautiful captor, was suckling me on blood and blood was rich in memory and memory was addictive. Night after night – or did it all happen in one night that seemed neverending? – I crawled to the whispering fountain and bowed, her long fingers drew my head to her breast, her red hair fell loose upon my shoulder, my mouth filling with words, inhaling memories, feeding on the dark milk of time. I drink her history and she becomes younger.

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Needless to say, I had long since opened the window of my room and looked down into the narrow courtyard. It was deeper than I'd expected. The wall was sheer, and unbroken by any other window, only an opening halfway down which bats seemed to fly in and out of. I would surely be killed if I tried to climb out. One time I heard what sounded like workmen in the yard, moving very heavy things. I could see only shadows and was afraid to call out. It might, on reflection, have been a dream. In another dream – a nightmare – I leaned out of the window and saw her crawling down the wall, her arms hunched like a spider's but her fingers impossibly extended and gripping like ivy. I keep having to tell myself it was a dream.

My nocturnal existence drives me through phases – of exhausted despair, of lurid fascination, of obsessive planning, and back to despair. Such psychological swings are now my only hold on time. In daylight I sleep well – unnaturally well, like hibernating. At dusk I awake and am myself for a while – the 'myself' of these successive states of mind, carrying me off through the forest of my prison with a notion of going a different way this time, or this time trying a different door. And wherever I go and however lost I become, I end up in the candlelit room; and the Countess is always there. At least, she appears before long; and from about that time, I lose track of myself. I know I'm a captive now. Not because the outside door, the door by which I entered, is always locked. Not because, whether I recollect returning or not, I always wake up in my bed just as twilight descends. I know I'm a captive because of how I dread and long for her presence, for the caress of her words, for the nourishment of her blood.

When speaking will not serve, when nothing will quench her passion to find utterance for eternity, there are still her eyes. Her deep, yellowy eyes. On those terrible occasions, those precious occasions, when words fall away and she fixes me with her eyes, I am lifted out of myself and the silence of the house, and the woods and the sky are filled with the howling of wolves and the snarling of wolves and the smell of wolves and the restlessness of wolves. All the nights of eternity rage with the music of wolves. And all the time I see only her beautiful eyes, her yellow eyes, her wolf's eyes.

I saw her clearly this time. Part human and part vine, her leafy fingers spreading out across the stonework and pulling her towards me. I watched her slowly grow, unable to move from my window; I felt her web creep over me. Another recurrent nightmare is that of the despairing escape attempt, on my knees and whining as I scratch ineffectually at the door. These are the dreams you dream in an old house, she whispers, as she gathers me into her cloak. But the most frequent, most terrifying nightmare is the dream of the wolf. Or perhaps this one isn't a dream either. Because it always starts with the eyes. But the eyes release me; the howling becomes distant; I step back. And my beautiful creature is silent and still before me, half woman half wolf, I can't explain how, she stands on four legs, majestic, more beautiful each night, and I'm enslaved not by the eyes but by my own disgusted hunger, my own desire. And as is the way with dreams, there is always a pause when nothing happens, nothing but stillness and a distant howling. And then the action is over in a hundredth of a second. The woman-wolf lunges forward with perfect aim and bites into me and the dream is done. But I've worked out what's peculiar about it. What's peculiar, each time I dream it, is that the long stillness of waiting ends not when the wolf decides to pounce: she bites only when a slight gesture of my head permits or wills her to.

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How long has it been now? It's not just that my sense of time is confounded. I honestly cannot tell if things are linear or simultaneous. Everything that's happened in fact begins to seem part of one event – one nightmare, one night. I suspect that time simply doesn't exist in this house, that each night is the same as the one that went before it. This would explain how she comes to have lived for centuries. My theory is that *she* is the prisoner here, not I. She's the one who dreams of escape, who scratches at the door. And is held not by hypnotism or locks but by a timelessness, in which nothing ever advances. She, however, has progressed in her arrangements. She has taken the time from me. The contracts have been signed. The boxes have gone. She hasn't asked me to write letters for some while now, or so it seems.

Last night – or was it centuries ago? – I asked for some writing paper. I knew there was no point in lying to her: I said I would like to write an account of my visit. She gestured to a rack with pale yellow paper. It was old paper, she was happy for me to use it. She held out a slender hand. I passed her a sheet, so thin it seemed to float between our fingers. She said it was old paper, the thinnest paper possible, manufactured specially for her, long ago, and watermarked with her cipher. Only *my* words may be written on this paper, I seemed to dream her saying.

Today I have an awful sense of doom. I have managed to stay awake. I began writing at dawn, convinced that I must finish by dusk. My apprehension is not for myself. But I know in my heart I shall never see my Countess again. In fact I'm not sure when I saw her last. Her appearance in dreams has long been more solid than her appearance in the room. Her speaking was never less silent than her shadow; and she cast no shadow, only dust. The sense of her presence, transposing her actual presence, imperceptibly became indistinguishable from her absence. But today, her absence is what I feel. Her absence is what terrifies me. All I know is that her fine yellow paper will carry my story. For myself I have no hope, for I'm sure there is no escape whatever. It seems to me that leaving the house would be to die. Or rather, that I was dead from the moment she spoke, precise and courteous, as she closed the door behind me on the night of my arrival.

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