

Interlude with the Undead

Written for the January 1979 issue of Playboy.

The author of "Interview with the Vampire" reveals for the first time an all-too-human aspect of her singular subject.

In the book, "Interview with the Vampire," Louis, who has been a member of the living dead for some 200 years, tells the story of his life to the interviewer, a young radio reporter in San Francisco.

But the book as published represents only a portion of the tapes of that interview made by the reporter. Louis told the young man much that was not included, particularly with regard to the master vampire, Armand, whom he had met in Paris. One tale was Armand's account of his methods of seduction; that is, the art of the vampire at its peak in the year 1876.

ARMAND'S LESSON:

As I've told you, Louis, each vampire selects his victims in his own way. The world is a veritable wilderness of singular beauties and each night too precious to allow for the slightest waste. Each night is a wedding, really, and the vampire is wed to the unique and alluring charms of that victim as surely as he is wed to that victim's life. You hold the spirit incarnate in your arms.

For some of us, monstrous breed that we are, and such a discerning and voracious company, it is the struggle that holds the quintessential fulfillment, the thrashing of the waning lover seems to soothe the preternatural soul. This is nonsense, really. These innocent and unsuspecting victims can't really struggle against a power such as our own. What lurks beneath these gentlemanly trappings is a strength that is unconquerable. Yet there are vampires who crave the semblance of battle, saying that it is the human spirit they love, its endurance, its faith.

I have no taste for violence, voluptuous as it may sometimes appear. It is the seduction that is perfectly in tune with this monster's heart. But do not mistake my meaning. It is not I who seduce the lovely beauties whom I take as my brides. It is they who seduce me through their dreams.

You see, they all want the embrace. There is a kernel in all of them that is "half in love with easeful death" and as I wander through the late-night streets in the chill hours, I can hear their plaintive sighs, a muted chorus rising from those beds, its rhythms penetrating the very walls. They summon me. They long for me. Gentleman Death, that has been my epithet, and I so treasure it. What gentleman can refuse a lady, after all?

Imagine her, my victim, caught in the maw of mortal life and so given to dreaming. She wants an extraordinary passion, something she's only glimpsed before and lost. The memory pricks her, a flicker in the recesses of her soul, a searing rapture known but for an instant when mortal and mortal intertwine.

It is for her summons that I listen, being myself sometimes the silent siren of death that can evoke that plea from her even as I quietly pass by. No one hears my steps. I do not hear them. It seems until she offers that faint murmur, I am not even there. These winding, narrow medieval streets shroud me, no moon cuts between the jutting roofs and I am cold, cold for her as I wander, waiting with a lover's devotion for that perfect call.

You know that our preternatural flesh cannot dispel the icy air that settles on our limbs. Ours is the chill of the wind howling through eternity.

So you can well imagine the ineffable sweetness of the moment of selection, of moving out of that damp and merciless might into the bedchamber. No two of them are the same.

I need not see her. I know she's there. A warmth emanates from her living flesh and, drawing near, I see the shape of that warmth--tender, helpless, prone. There is something melancholy, sad about her nestled among the trinkets of her mortal life, the soft bed, her loose and fragrant garments, remnants of girlhood--she sleeps with the trusting sleep of the child. I tell you if I were not the monster, I would be touched. But back to the pliant treasure herself, breathing deeply in her dreams. Is it more vivid, that dream, as I draw close to her? It seems I see her eyelids flutter, she shapes a name with her lips. I tell you, she knows that the object of her inexpressible longing is there. She feels these eyes on her naked shoulders, this hand on the pale-petal flesh of her soft thigh.

It is seduction, remember.

There is never violence. I tell you that all embraces, no matter how tender, are surfeited with violence. Violence is the throbbing of the unsatisfied heart. Violence is the desperate pulsing of that tender fold between the legs, that precious cleft that shapes its own emptiness; violence is the restless turning of her limbs. This is the heart and core of all violence for which the rest is rude metaphor, rough deceiving, a lie born of abused passion and broken dreams. You want the true violence? Neglect her. Then bend your head to her breasts and rest it there, to hear that awful moan.

"Half in love with easeful death" is half in love with life still. She awakes shivering and I feel my lips surrender to a smile. I know too well that I might quiet her with the stroke of my hand even as its coldness shocks her, but let her wake just a little to the crude world of lamps and torn realities. Let her see her demon lover. Let her see these eyes adoring her. Let her know that in serving me she will make me utterly and completely her slave.

Have I ever failed? It's natural enough, that question. The world is rife with passionate women, so you wonder have they drawn back from me, fought, begged for reprieve? Has some dim alarm ever sounded in the depths of those heaving breasts? Weren't these women just a little

frightened by this fervent gaze? Never. Forgive my laughter, you don't understand the promise of my caress.

They have struggled too long and in vain for union, these succulent mortal beauties, they've known the prisons of their own flesh too well. Observe the flare of those narrow hips, the subtle curve of the buttocks; these are but the contours of a dungeon cell. See how their love acts have so often resembled the quarrel, how they've thrashed and, alone afterwards, lain uneasy in half sleep.

Mine is the embrace that will penetrate that isolation, mine is the kiss that will delve to the root of the soul. She knows it, my bride; she knows it without my saying it; she knows it with an instinct that is all too human and that we immortals too quickly forget. Imagine her splendid terror and how easily it melts to languor in my arms. She is meek, pliant, on the verge of some awesome awakening. She hardly feels the little tear. The breath hisses low from between her pearl-white teeth, her eyelids show the barest gleam beneath the dark lash. She cannot know how my pulse quickens with her pulse, how my heart feeds upon her heart, how pulling me toward her, I draw the heated perfumed elixir from her with my own soul, pulling the cords of her being warm through her veins.

She is so warm.

Do I have to tell you how that smooth tight flesh of her arching back burns my fingers, how those taut nipples brand my chest? She is listless, fading. One arm drops to her side, hands close weakly on the lost coverlet and, turning from me even as she is given over to me, her eyes are veiled with her silken hair.

And yet my monster's eye charts her swoon. This is the union she has longed for, and with the cunning of the beast, I have let her go too soon. I measure her, I hold her, I tingle with the life she's given me and see her moist limbs as the vessel of my mounting passion, alive as I am with her life and soothed and tormented as she is with mine.

Nothing divides us now. Her fingers prod, I savor the groans, those piquant and spirited utterances. She's mine.

Ah, but you know the price of this modulation, this rhythm. She cannot imagine my thirst for her. If she placed her hand on the marble stone in the churchyard at midnight, she might begin to understand this harrowing loneliness and, with it, she would come to know my art. I draw back from her, aching for her. I hold her, this struggling sparrow in my easy grip.

How long will that taste of her content me? It is sweet to touch her bent neck, her tousled hair. But she's given me her life's blood; what am I to give in return?

Yes, I said the word, return. Perhaps all along, you've thought me some hard and simple monster who would trick her in her sublime pleasure and give her only darkness finally as her reward? You underestimate me, you fail to understand the fire and the fiber of my own dreams.

And she's too tender to me, little bride. You misunderstand the whole affair.

Rather, I become the fount of secrets. I let her part the open shirt with her own hands. I can feel her lips, quivering, virginal, that touching eagerness, I let her taste, I let her drink, and she is wild. Now I can see the incandescence of a vampire in her eyes, a shimmer to that beguiling form. The clock ticks, the wind whispers in the passage. There is much for her to learn. But she is spent now with the first undulating wave and I am in no great haste to bring this to its close.

Rather, I lie like the bridegroom with her, as if accustomed to these mortal beds and their trappings, and I have time for mortal dreams.

You know that we never forget it. Vampire, Nosferatu, Virdilak. What have we all in common? What separates our cloaked and smiling figures

from the other unholy inhabitants of the monster realm? Simply this: that we all were and still are men.

So let me dream for a while. Let me be young. Let me become some anxious, urgent creature riding as I did in the days of brief life through the open country fields. I feel the horse under me, his striding power. The wheat blows in the wind. And through the shifting trees, I see the sun again, warm as by bride's blood; it falls on my face, on my hands. It is her blood that makes this real as I lie there, but even as the sky is shot with those swift gold-edged clouds, it's fading, fading. I must wake. I would lead my fledgling further on.

And she? She dreams as a vampire now. She stirs. And limp and somnolent, she falls into my waiting arms.

What would you have now? That is, if you were I?

Should I usher her into the timeless life on my own? I think not. Look at that superb young form; what does it cry for, if not for another woman equally as beautiful; if not for the craft of another lady-love, supple, scented and schooled by me? And waiting on these dreary winter nights as she always waits for the fledglings that I bring her, for what is always best when shared. This is a dance for three.

Imagine the patience of such a lady-love, dark-haired, succulent; is she petulant when she sees my new bride? What of the postulant herself in such encounters; does she spurn the skilled and nurtured woman to whom I present her? What do you think? Must I instruct my ladylove to flaunt her treasures? Oh, no. She bends with an unconcealed abandon and I see my new bride, afflicted, helplessly drawn. I wonder, would it give the master a little more pleasure if they did not go so willingly into each other's perfumed arms? A cold agony comes over me in watching the soft crush of breast to breast. I see their lips drinking one from the other with a mortal urgency I'd forgotten; they moan with some submissive sentiment I no longer know.

I cannot bear it any longer. I cannot be content with a feast only for my eyes. This is what I've waited for too long, slaves shaped to the will of the master, they may command me. I feel the prick of the hot skin again, that searing luxuriant gush, one and then the other of them, and back again, first my dark and sultry ladylove, then my shimmering bride. When will it ever end, when will I be permitted to rest? It seems these hearts so perfectly tuned now to my own will not release me, they will not permit me to withdraw. My mistresses are merciless. I was a kinder master. "Do you love me?" comes the plaintive question as I lead them. "Do you love me?" as I gaze into those glittering eyes. Their lips are blood red, fledgling teeth tease the tender flesh. "Do you love me?" comes the desperate entreaty as I gather them against my monstrous and lonely breast, lonely, lonely beyond their dazzling preternatural dreams. "Do you love me?" comes the whisper again, even as the sun dissolves the shadows. But their mute and smiling faces are pitiless. And, my anguishes complete, "Do you love me?" I implore them again.