

**Cast:**

**AN ELDERLY ARISTOCRAT**

**HIS YOUNGER MALE HOUSEGUEST AND BIOGRAPHER**

**ACT I**

**SCENE ONE**

(THE MALE HOUSEGUEST/BIOGRAPHER SITS IN AN ANTIQUE CHAIR AND DOES NOT SPEAK THROUGHOUT, WHILE THE ARISTOCRAT PACES ACROSS THE STAGE DELIVERING A MONOLOGUE. WHEN THE HOUSEGUEST IS NOT ACTIVELY LISTENING OR ACKNOWLEDGING WHAT IS BEING SAID HE WILL BE WRITING DOWN WHAT HE HAS HEARD, OR HE CAN BE TAKING SIPS OF WINE FROM A GLASS, POURING HIMSELF A FRESH GLASS OR CUTTING A LOAF OF BREAD AND EATING IT.)

**ARISTOCRAT**

Tell me my friend, have you ever loved someone so completely, so fervently and so intensely that when they departed this life, you wished you had the courage to follow them, though you dreaded what might await you? You may not believe it, to look at me now, but I was once a handsome, vigorous young fellow with a lust for life and as such I loved and was loved. I'm not ashamed to admit it. And though the loss of such a love has brought me acute anguish, the like of which you cannot imagine - for no conventional affair of the heart can compare to that which I have experienced - I have not regretted having loved and lost, as the poets would have it. I can not imagine anyone having been as ill-used as myself, but I want you to know that I am no longer consumed by bitterness and that there was a time when this frail body was animated to the very fibre of its being and this weary heart quickened with the rapture of real passion. Yes, I knew true happiness. And it is the memory of that blissful union that sustains me and gives me hope that there may yet be redemption for an old reprobate who is now tired of life and wishes nothing more than to surrender to that endless, dreamless sleep. Though I had lived a full twenty years before I met my beloved, it was only from that day that I felt truly alive. Before then I merely existed.

Love is the very reason for living. Is it not? Without companionship, affection and the unspoken understanding that two souls share when in complete accord, we are merely sleepwalking through life. And I should know, for I have been in that wretched state now for what seems like an eternity. And yet, I could not follow the one who was so dear to me into the unknown. The one who gave meaning to my life. Oh, believe me, I tried. And more than once in those empty days that followed my bereavement when sorrow weighed upon me so heavily that I feared my heart would cease to beat or burst from the violent wracking sobs that I could not contain. No living thing should have to endure being left alone in the dark when the light that nurtures it has been extinguished.

From that moment my life had no meaning, no purpose. All I had were memories. And what are those but vapour, a vague impression like a fleeting shadow, a vivid dream that is glimpsed and is gone. From the moment that last breath is taken, the loved one ceases to be real for those left behind. It is no consolation to tell oneself that their immortal soul resides in paradise, for you cannot see them, speak to them or hold them. They are gone. And there's an end to it. To compound the pain of grief, there is always the nagging doubt that paradise is a fantasy, a myth perpetuated by those who have nothing but wishful thinking to sustain them and those who have more than their share, but who do not seem too eager to surrender their temporal power or wealth for a greater reward in the celestial realm.

And yet, despite the steely grip that grief had upon me, I could not marshal the courage to end my misery. I tried, but at the critical moment I could not make that leap of faith into the abyss.

It was not a question of belief. For if there is a heaven, I know there is no place for me there. Since my loss I have been unfaithful to my love, having sated my hunger with others. At first I was ashamed and cursed myself for my weakness, but then I realised that I could not help myself. I was at the mercy of a compulsion. Once you have known such desire, you must satisfy the craving or go mad. Love is as much an emotional addiction as it is physical. Or at least it is for me. Once you have drunk from the wellspring, from the fountain of youth, you must quench your thirst again and again or you age more rapidly than if you had not imbibed in the first instance. If you are a passionate being as I am, you cannot live without love in whatever form you find it. This, I realised, is why I could not follow my beloved after death. I had to live and savour the exquisite pleasure of longing and then the ecstasy of gratification.

I hope I am not shocking you. I have been living alone for so long I have become somewhat indifferent to the sensibilities of others. I have not entertained a guest for – not since...

Well, let's just say that it has been so long that I now find the ways of polite society quaint and amusing. But it has not always been so. In my youth I had a most enviable reputation as a socialite and a gracious host and was renowned for my lavish soirees on which I spent a considerable part of my not inconsiderable fortune. I willingly lavished the greater part on my beloved without a thought for the consequences. The remainder I am sad to say, I squandered in empty and extravagant revelries after my bereavement in a vain effort to assuage my grief. And over the ensuing years as my house fell into disrepair, my wealth depleted in proportion to my own physical decline to the point where I now condescend to accept employment to keep body and soul together. Yes, as demeaning as it is to one of my breeding and station, I have acceded to necessity and now ply a trade of sorts, albeit one that allows me to capitalise on my title and family history. But inevitably, the years and the grief have also taken their toll upon this hollow shell you see before you, just as they did upon my house. I have aged none too graciously, I confess. But I bear up. A little rouge to bring a blush to these pallid cheeks, a touch of greasepaint to mask the lines etched in my face and I have taken twenty years off my life. Ah, if only.

(Pause)

You don't say anything. Have you nothing to add? No observations to make on the pitiful hand that Fate has dealt me? I know you've heard this confession on more than one occasion these past weeks, but I have no qualms in repeating and even elaborating upon it as I know that this is precisely what you have travelled so far to hear, is it not? And after all, I have much to confess.

Still you say nothing. Just noting everything I say in that elaborate copperplate hand of yours as if I were an exotic creature whose behaviour must be observed and recorded for posterity.

How I envy you, your life among the gay whirl of society. The drawing rooms, the salons and the theatres in which you move and are feted for your intellect and your imagination. I even yearn for the mundane routine of such a life and would gladly exchange it for my accursed isolation were it not for the bitter sweet memory of that love I speak of. The love that haunts me to this day. I know that I am doomed to live alone and estranged from bustling humanity. I have paid a most dreadful price for my dissolute ways and excesses for which I cannot bring myself to apologise or atone, but now I must endure the solitude that only the insane and the inconsolable must suffer in silence. To experience the bitter sweet longing of lost love once is torture, but to suffer loss over and over again as I have in my vain attempts to relive the one great love of my life, is a pain that gnaws at the very fibre of my being, at the burning ember that is all that remains of my soul.

(bitter laughter)

But here I am again, playing to the gallery, wringing every wretched line of this pathetic melodrama that has been my life for the last ripple of applause. And for whom? An audience of one. I think it best that we part here, my friend. The sun is going down and I am due to take the stage in a few minutes. You have seen my act once and I must confess, I stick pretty much to the same 'business' every performance. The locals are easily amused. They laugh at the crudest of jokes, they leer at the lithesome dancers in the neighbouring tent and they stare like frightened children at the exhibits, our carnival of horrors, our circus of freaks of which I, it appears, am the foremost attraction. But once a man of your education and experience of the legitimate theatre has seen our unsophisticated little entertainment, there is little value in sitting through it again. So I bid you farewell and a safe journey back to England. I trust you enjoyed your stay in our country. The Carpathians are particularly beautiful at this time of the year. Oh, and good luck with your book, should you finish it. Though I'm still not convinced that your choice of title is a wise one. No one beyond these borders will know what 'Nosferatu' means, that it translates as 'Undead'. You would be better using my name. Though I must say I can not imagine those genteel ladies of London pouring over such horrors, no matter what you call it. You'll be hounded from your lodgings before the ink on the first reviews are dry. Mark my words, Mr Stoker you will regret the day you met me.