LINES 760 to 822

The next time I was going to be late, I did call Mrs. Clay. I explained to her that some of my classmates and I were going to do our homework together over tea. She said that was fine. I hung up and went by myself to the university library. Johan Binnerts, the librarian in the medieval collection in Amsterdam, was getting used to the sight of me, I thought; at least he smiled gravely whenever I stopped by with a new question, and he always asked how my history essays were coming along. Mr. Binnerts found for me a passage in a nineteenth-century text that I was particularly pleased to have, and I spent some time making notes from it. I have a copy of the text now, in my study at Oxford—I found the book again a few years ago in a bookshop: Lord Gelling’s History of Central Europe. I have a sentimental attachment to it, after all these years, although I never open it without a bleak feeling, too. I remember very well the sight of my own hand, smooth and young, copying down passages in my school notebook:

In addition to displaying great cruelty, Vlad Dracula possessed great valor. His daring was such that in 1462 he crossed the Danube and carried out a night raid on horseback in the very encampment of Sultan Mehmed II and his army, which had assembled there to attack Wallachia. In this raid Dracula killed several thousand Turkish soldiers, and the Sultan barely escaped with his life before the Ottoman guard forced the Wallachians into a retreat.

A similar quantity of material might be dredged up in connection with the name of any great feudal lord of his era in Europe—more than this, in many cases, and much more, in a few. The extraordinary thing about the information available on Dracula is its longevity—that is to say, his refusal to die as an historical presence, the persistence of his legend. The few sources available in England refer directly or obliquely to other sources whose diversity would make any historian profoundly curious. He seems to have been notorious in Europe even during his own lifetime—a great accomplishment in days when Europe was a vast and by our standards disjointed world whose governments were connected by horse messenger and river freight, and when horrifying cruelty was not an unusual characteristic among the nobility. Dracula’s notoriety did not end with his mysterious death and strange burial in 1476, but seems to have continued almost unabated until it faded into the brightness of the Enlightenment in the West.

The entry on Dracula ended there. I’d had enough history to puzzle over for one day, but I wandered into the English literature division and was glad to find that the library owned a copy of Bram Stoker’s Dracula. In fact, it would take me quite a few visits to read it. I didn’t know if I was allowed to check out books there, but even if I had been, I wouldn’t have wanted to bring it home, where I would have the difficult choice of hiding it or leaving it carefully out in the open. Instead, I read Dracula sitting in a slippery chair by a library window. If I peered outside, I could see one of my favorite canals, the Singel, with its flower market, and people buying snacks of herring from a little stand. It was a wonderfully secluded spot, and the back of a bookshelf sheltered me from the other readers in the room.

There, in that chair, I gradually allowed Stoker’s alternating Gothic horror and cozy Victorian love stories to engulf me. What I wanted from the book, I didn’t quite know; according to my father, Professor Rossi had thought it mainly useless as a source of information about the real Dracula. The courtly, repulsive Count Dracula of the novel was a compelling figure, I thought, even if he didn’t have much in common with Vlad Tepes. But Rossi himself had been convinced that Dracula had become one of the undead, in life—in the course of history. I wondered if a novel could have the power to make something so strange happen in actuality. After all, Rossi had made his discovery well after the publication of Dracula. Vlad Dracula, on the other hand, had been a force for evil almost four hundred years before Stoker’s birth. It was very perplexing.

And hadn’t Professor Rossi also said that Stoker had turned up lots of sound information about vampire lore? I had never even seen a vampire movie—my father did not like horror of any sort—and the conventions of the story were new to me. According to Stoker, a vampire could attack his victims only between sunset and sunrise. The vampire lived indefinitely, feasting on the blood of mortals and thereby converting them to his own undead state. He could take the form of bat or wolf or mist; he could be repelled by the use of garlic blossoms or a crucifix; he could be destroyed if you drove a stake through his heart and filled his mouth with garlic while he slept in his coffin during the daylight. A silver bullet through the heart could also destroy him.

None of this would have frightened me, in itself; it all seemed too remote, too superstitious, quaint. But there was one aspect of the story that haunted me after each session, after I’d put the book back on its shelf, carefully noting the page number where I’d left off. It was a thought that followed me down the steps of the library and across the canal bridges, until I reached our door. The Dracula of Stoker’s imagination had a favorite sort of victim: young women.

My father was longing more than ever, he said, for the South in spring; he wanted me to see its beauties, too. My vacation was coming soon, anyway, and his meetings in Paris would detain him only a few days. I had learned not to press him, either for travel or for stories; when he was ready, the next would come, but never, never when we were at home. I believe that he didn’t want to bring that dark presence directly into our house.

We took the train to Paris and later a car south into the Cévennes. In the mornings I worked on two or three essays in my increasingly lucid French, to mail back to school. I still have one of these; even now, decades later, unfolding it returns to me that feeling of the untranslatable heart of France in May, the smell of grass that was not grass but l’herbe, edibly fresh, as if all French vegetation were fantastically culinary, the ingredients of a salad or something to stir into cheese.

At farms along the road we stopped to buy picnics better than any restaurant could have made for us: boxes of new strawberries that gave off a red glow in the sun and seemed to need no washing; cylinders of goat cheese weighty as barbells and encrusted with a rough gray mold, as if they’d been rolled across a cellar floor. My father drank dark red wine, unlabeled and costing only centimes, which he recorked after each meal, carrying with it a small glass wrapped carefully in a napkin. For dessert we ravaged whole loaves of newly baked bread from the last town, inserting squares of dark chocolate into them. My stomach ached with pleasure and my father said ruefully that he’d have to diet again when we returned to our ordinary lives.

That road led us through the Southeast and then, a blurred day or two later, up into cooler mountains. “Les Pyrénées-Orientales,” my father told me, unfolding the road map across one of our picnics. “I’ve been wanting to come back down here for years.” I traced our route with my finger and found we were surprisingly close to Spain. This thought—and the beautiful word Orientales—jolted me. We were approaching the edges of my known world, and for the first time I realized that someday I might go farther and farther out of it. My father wanted to see a particular monastery, he said. “I think we can reach the town at its foot by tonight and walk up there tomorrow.”

“Is it high up?” I asked.

“It’s about halfway up the mountains, which protected it from all sorts of invaders. It was built just at the year 1000. Incredible—this little place carved into a rock, difficult for even the most enthusiastic pilgrims to reach. But you’ll like the town below it just as much. It’s an old spa town. It’s really charming.” My father smiled when he said this, but he was restless, folding the map too quickly. I felt that he would soon tell me another story; perhaps this time I wouldn’t need to ask.

I did like Les Bains, when we drove into it that afternoon. It was a large sand-colored rock village spread over one small peak. The great Pyrénées hung above it, shadowing all but its broadest lower streets, which stretched toward river valleys and the dry flat farms below. Dusty plane trees, cropped square around a series of dusty piazzas, provided no shade whatsoever for the strolling townspeople and the tables where old women sold crocheted tablecloths and bottles of lavender extract. From there we could look up to the predictable stone church, haunted by swallows, at the town’s summit, and see the church tower floating in an enormous shadow of mountains, a long peak of gloom that would stretch down this side of the village street by street as the sun set.

We dined heartily on a soup something like gazpacho, and then on veal cutlets, in the first-floor restaurant of one of the town’s nineteenth-century hotels. The restaurant manager put one foot on the brass rail of the bar next to our table and asked idly, yet courteously, about our travels. He was a homely man, dressed in immaculate black, with a narrow face and sharply olive complexion. He spoke staccato French, flavored by some spice I hadn’t encountered before, and I understood far less of it than my father did. My father translated.

“Ah, of course—our monastery,” began the maître d’, in answer to my father’s question. “You know that Saint-Matthieu draws eight thousand visitors every summer? Yes, it really does. But they are all so nice, quiet, lots of foreign Christian people who go up on foot, it’s a real pilgrimage still. They make their own beds in the mornings, and we hardly notice them come and go. Of course, many other people come for les bains. You will take the waters, no?”

My father replied that we had to turn north again after just two nights here and that we planned to spend all of the next day at the monastery.

“You know there are a lot of legends in this place, some remarkable ones, and all true,” the maître d’ said, smiling, which made his narrow face suddenly handsome. “The young lady understands? She might be interested to know them.”

“Je comprends, merci,” I said politely.

“Bon. I shall tell you one. You don’t mind? Please, eat your cutlet—it’s best very hot.” At that moment, the restaurant door swung open, and a smiling old couple who could only have been residents came in and chose a table. “Bon soir, buenas tardes,” our manager said in one breath. I looked a question at my father, and he laughed.

“Yes, we are very mixed up here,” the manager said, laughing too. “We are la salade, all the different cultures. My grandfather spoke very good Spanish—perfect Spanish—and he fought in their civil war when he was already an old man. We love all our languages here. No bombs for us, no terrorists, like les Basques. We are not criminals.” He looked around indignantly, as if someone had contradicted him.

“Explain to you later,” my father said under his breath.

“So, I will tell you a story. I am proud to say they call me the historian of our town. Eat. Our monastery was founded in the year 1000, you know already. Actually, the year 999, because the monks who chose this spot were preparing for the Apocalypse to come, you know, in the millennium. They were climbing in these mountains looking for a place for their church. Then one of them had a vision in his sleep that Saint Matthieu stepped down from heaven to place a white rose on the peak above them. The next day they climbed up there and consecrated the mountain with their prayers. Very pretty—you will love it. But that is not the great legend. That is only the founding of the abbey church.

“So, when the monastery and its little church were just a century old, one of the most pious monks, who taught the younger ones, died mysteriously in middle age. He was called Miguel de Cuxa. They mourned him terribly, and he was buried in their crypt. You know, that is the crypt we are famous for, because it is the oldest Romanesque architecture in Europe. Yes!” He tapped the bar crisply with long, squared-off fingers. “Yes! Some people say this honor goes to Saint-Pierre, outside Perpignan, but they are just lying for the tourist trade.

“In any case, this great scholar was buried in the crypt, and soon after that a curse came over the monastery. Several monks died of a strange plague. They were found dead one by one in the cloisters—the cloisters are beautiful, you will love them. They are the most beautiful in Europe. So, the dead monks were found white as ghosts, as if they had no blood in their veins. Everyone suspected poisons.

“Finally one young monk—he was the favorite student of the monk who had died—he went down into the crypt and dug up his teacher, against the wishes of the abbot, who was very frightened. And they found the teacher alive, but not really alive, if you know what I mean. A living death. He was rising at night to take the lives of his fellow monks. In order to send the poor man’s soul up to the right place, they brought holy water from a shrine in the mountains and got a very sharp stake —” He made a dramatic shape in the air, so I would understand the sharpness of the object. I had been fixed on him and his strange French, putting his story together in my mind with the greatest effort of concentration. My father had stopped translating for me, and at that moment his fork clinked against his plate. When I looked up, I suddenly saw that he was as white as the tablecloth, staring at our new friend.

“Could we —” He cleared his throat and wiped his mouth with his napkin once or twice. “Could we have coffee?”

“But you have not had the salade.” Our host looked distressed. “It is exceptional. And then we have poires belles-Hélène this evening, and some nice cheese, also a gâteau for the young lady.”

“Certainly, certainly,” my father said hurriedly. “Let’s have all those things, yes.”