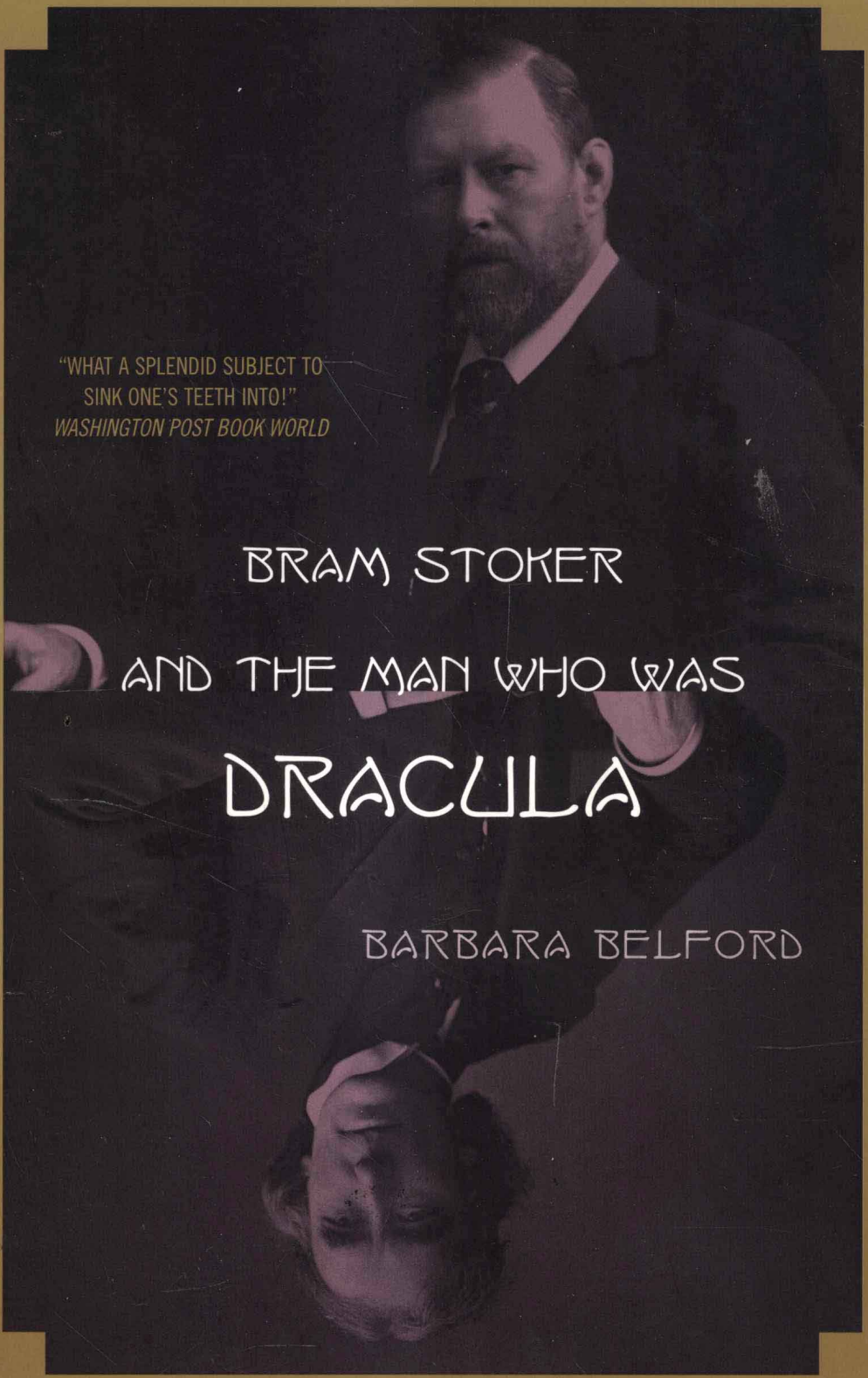
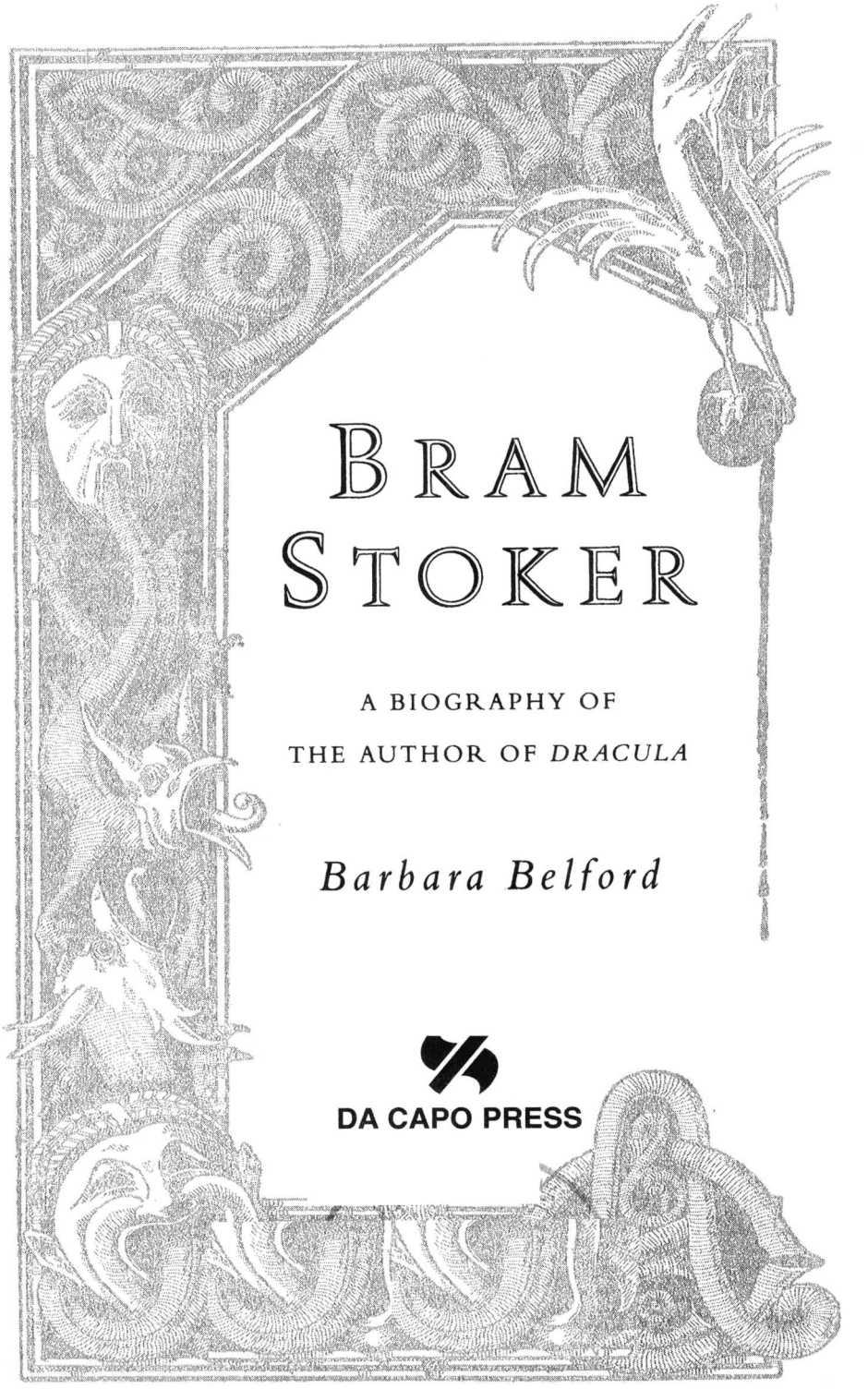
DA CAPO PRESS



"WHAT A SPLENDID SUBJECT TO SINK ONE'S TEETH INTO!"
WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

BRAM STOKER AND THE MAN WHO WAS DRACULA

BARBARA BELFORD



BRAM STOKER

A BIOGRAPHY OF
THE AUTHOR OF *DRACULA*

Barbara Belford

DA CAPO PRESS

CIP data available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-306-81098-0

First Da Capo Press Edition 2002
Reprinted by arrangement with the author

Published by Da Capo Press,
A Member of the Perseus Books Group
http://www.dacapopress.com

Da Capo Press books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the U.S. by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets Department at the Perseus Books Group, 11 Cambridge Center, Cambridge, MA 02142, or call (800) 255-1514 or (617) 252-5298, or e-mail j.mccrary@perseusbooks.com.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—-05 04 03 02 01

Introduction

"I only slept a few hours when I went to bed, and feeling that I could not sleep any more, got up. I had hung my shaving glass by the window, and was just beginning to shave: Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder, and heard the Count's voice saying to me 'Good morning.' I started, for it amazed me that I had not seen him, since the reflection of the glass covered the whole room behind me . . . but there was no sign of a man in it, except myself."

—Jonathan Harker's journal

The unseen face in the mirror reflects the soul. Therein is revealed the darker aspects, the hidden sins, the haunting shock of self-recognition. For the world one wears a mask; for the truth one looks in the mirror. Isolated in an impenetrable castle, Jonathan Harker confronts his doubleness, his other self.

Double meanings and double identities activated *Dracula* as they did the life of its author. Nearly a decade before Bram Stoker's classic horror story was published in 1897, a London artist preserved another doppelgänger motif: Stoker's love-hate relationship with the celebrated Victorian actor Henry Irving, the Laurence Olivier of his

day, whom Stoker served as business manager, social secretary, and loyal friend.

An obsessive intimacy informs the drawing, no larger than a calling card: Stoker hovers to the right while Irving—impeccable in formal evening dress—straightens his tie in a triptych mirror. The artist has crosshatched Stoker into the background, diminished his presence. There but not there, Stoker is now the unseen face in the mirror, the soulless invisible man, kin to the eternal outsider: the vampire.

Dracula was one hundred years old in 1997. Had Stoker achieved the physical immortality of his creation, the then-150-year-old writer would be amazed that his novel has been translated into forty-four languages; that Count Dracula, the most filmed character in history after Sherlock Holmes, has usurped the red devil with pitchfork and pointed tail as the preferred icon of evil; that members of "fang" clubs subscribe to newsletters extolling vampires and even, in the age of AIDS, self-styled vampires drink blood, but from monogamous donors.

Mostly, he would be shocked to read about himself. Calumnies have been spawned to justify the premise that no genial Irishman could have written such a perversely sexual novel. In biography and fiction, Stoker variously has been given a frigid wife, a penchant for prostitutes (particularly during their menstrual period), a sexually transmitted disease, and inherited insanity.

Starting in the 1970s, the *Dracula* exegetes squeezed out every Freudian, religious, political, and occult meaning from the novel, leaving behind innuendo and misinformation about the life of this most elusive of authors. There were no Stokerian scholars to rise up and protest, to challenge undocumented facts. It appeared that horror devotees warmed to *Dracula*'s author having a perverse nature. There had to be some unsavory explanation of why, out of an oeuvre of eighteen books, only *Dracula* succeeds as literature—in fact, is a masterpiece.

To find a usable past, biographers peel off layers of the ego in search of a universal truth about their subjects, being careful not to expose

what may be only a terrible emptiness. So amorphous was Stoker's protective tissue that stripping led to nothingness. The center did not hold; it simply evaporated. Stoker was really a *matryoshki,* one of those red-and-yellow-lacquered Russian nesting dolls, identical as to costume and expression, made in diminishing sizes, one inside the other, growing backwards to infancy. The smallest *matryoshki* is the invalid child, unable to walk for seven years, who will never put a name to a defining illness.

"Childhood builds its own shrines; and these live untarnished and unimpaired to the end," Stoker wrote in *The Man,* his eighth novel. In his early works, childhood fantasies—chivalric themes of brave men rescuing good women—abound, but there are yawning gaps between child and man, the most obvious of all liminal zones. In many ways the man remained the child, always wanting—but unable—to cast a permanent reflection. Freudians would blame a weak ego or an infantile superego, or that convenient complex from *Oedipus Rex.* I, however, believe that Stoker desperately wanted to grow up, to be a separate person, but stronger forces controlled his destiny. Above all there was Henry Irving.

Stoker was not an obliging person to think about for five years. He frustrated intimate probing; his reticence was monumental. At times he fascinated and irritated me. He did not keep a personal diary but a "jotting diary," focusing almost exclusively on Henry Irving's achievements. Stoker loved codes and puzzles. Even the characters in *Dracula* conceal their thoughts by keeping journals in shorthand. In response to the question "Who are you?" I imagine him saying, "I am who you want me to be."

In Victorian memoirs Stoker enters and exits quickly, leaving a whiff of lofty manners and an aftertaste of no identity. He was the Anglo-Irish outsider, a dreamy romantic who attained a level of personal friendship with the English establishment but is remembered only as Henry Irving's factotum—crosshatched into the background. He yearned for recognition as a writer but in his lifetime remained a mediocrity, an uninstructive state for anyone. He did, however, embody an eternal theme: failure in the pursuit of dreams. He never considered leaving a paper trail for biographers. Why would anyone want to write his biography? Indeed, no one gave

much thought to the author of *Dracula* until some two decades after his death, and then only because the film industry put their imprimatur on vampire films.

Stoker divided the world into good women and brave men, but such pastoral thoughts were archaic as the nineteenth century lurched to a close. Even as he sought in his novels to preserve the old order of chivalry, women clamored not for deliverance but for sexual freedom. Written during the demise of decadence and the birth of psychoanalysis, *Dracula* celebrates Stoker's final quest to safeguard embattled Victorian values from modernism, to preserve the romance of the family.

"It is bad women who seem to know men best, and to be able to influence them most," a character argues in *The Man*. "*They* can turn and twist and mold them as they choose. And *they* never hesitate to speak their own wishes; to ask for what they want. There are no tragedies, of the negative kind, in *their* lives. Why should good women leave power to such as they? Why should good women's lives be wrecked for a convention?" Why, indeed!

When historian Bram Dijkstra called *Dracula* "a central document in the late nineteenth-century war on women," he isolated only one aspect of Stoker's sexual treatise, which is riddled—albeit subliminally—with primal scenes and fears about homosexuality and the feminization of desire. Or, as author David Skal puts it, Stoker's novel is an attempt to rescue "an embattled male's deepest sense of himself as a male."

In 1897 critics filtered out erotic messages: *Dracula* was a ripping good, blood-curdling novel, perfect reading on the train for a paralyzed century. The same year Ibsen's *Ghosts,* with its unabashed depiction of the effects of hereditary venereal disease, shocked theatregoers. Ibsen was pilloried for daring to be explicit about sexual relationships in contemporary society, while Stoker blithely commands Dracula to force his way into bedrooms—even vamping Mina while her husband sleeps by her side.

Confronted by Stoker's ordinariness, baffled by his inarticulate gloom, and bewildered by his motivations for writing a novel dense

with sexual innuendo, some critics claim he did not realize the import of what he was writing: it was all an unconscious dream. But they are in error. Stoker was an intelligent and insightful man, and his position at the Lyceum Theatre placed him at the social nexus of Victorian society. He was many things, but naïve was not one of them; he was fully aware of the subtexts in his horror tale.

There are too many symbolic lines, lines such as: "Van Helsing went about his work systematically. Holding his candle so that he could read the coffin plates, and so holding it that the sperm dropped in white patches which congealed as they touched the metal, he made assurance of Lucy's coffin. Another search in his bag, and he took out a turnscrew." But Stoker chose to mask the erotic in the supernatural, to use a narrative structure told through letters, recordings, journals, and other documents. By eliminating the author's voice, he distanced himself from the unspeakable.

Earlier biographies—Harry Ludlam's *A Biography of Dracula: The Life Story of Bram Stoker,* published in 1962, followed thirteen years later by Daniel Farson's *The Man Who Wrote Dracula*—lacked source notes and adequate documentation. Ludlam relied on family documents and the memory of Stoker's son, Noel. Farson added his own brand of sensationalism. Both ignored unpublished archival material, available in Britain and the United States, which is quoted for the first time in this biography. Bram Stoker's granddaughter Ann Stoker and great-grandson Noël Dobbs graciously made the family papers available to me, and I read through the material—mostly genealogical history—previously consulted by Ludlam and Farson. Since the time of their research, autographed letters from Oscar Wilde, W. S. Gilbert, and others had been sold to libraries, where I located and verified them.

At the Leeds University Library, I consulted the Brotherton Collection of some five thousand letters written to Stoker in his position as acting manager of the Lyceum. Happily, there were a few clues hidden among the letters not beginning: "May I have two box seats . . ." and "Please ask Mr. Irving if he will preside. . . ."

At Stratford-upon-Avon's library, adjacent to Shakespeare's birthplace, I examined the Bram Stoker Collection. Dedicated to Henry Irving, it apparently contains every scrap of paper Stoker did

not throw away: menus, invitations, seating plans—even notations on the gummed flaps of envelopes. It was fascinating. But I was not writing a biography of Irving. I noticed there were several uncatalogued boxes and inquired if they might contain something about Stoker. They did! Expectantly I opened a box of yellowing newspaper articles and was surprised to discover that Stoker had subscribed to a personal clipping service. Here was an ego after all. I read reports of speeches given and parties attended (with his name underlined). Seeking diaries to guide me through his private life, I had unearthed a public life. Another box held musty photographs, including one of him walking away from the Theatre Royal in Bradford the morning after Henry Irving's death. This lonely scene will, for me, forever symbolize Stoker's life.

As can be seen in manuscripts at libraries in Dublin, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, Stoker was a hasty writer who deplored self-editing, preferring the cut-and-paste journalistic style. The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., retains the holograph manuscript of *Reminiscences of Henry Irving.* Stoker put more of himself into this memoir than was published, and this excised material quoted here for the first time now adds to a greater understanding of his life. When it came to *Dracula,* however, his pen relaxed. Dates on the *Dracula Notes* at the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia certify a six-year devotion to plotting and writing this vampire tale; the typescript manuscript authenticates last-minute changes in the title and ending. This was the only novel he took within himself.

As Stoker's life took shape for me, there were many unanswered questions, all dovetailing into Stoker's relationship with Irving. I asked myself: If Irving had not existed for Stoker, would *Dracula* have been stillborn? And most importantly, I asked myself: Why struggle through a definitive Stoker biography when he so obscured his tracks? My first biography was of Violet Hunt, a Kensington hostess, novelist, and self-proclaimed wife of Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford). Violet brought Stoker into her literary circle after they first met in Whitby in 1890,

the year Stoker began his notes for the novel he originally called *The Dead Un-Dead*. The chapter needed an ending.

The Bram Stoker I eventually came to call my friend was witty but sad, rigid but responsible, immature but loving. He took many secrets with him, but he left us *Dracula,* and an important message: unspeakable things can happen to ordinary people. And a warning: those who allow themselves to be subsumed by a master are intellectually diminished. Like his vampire count, Stoker desperately wanted to connect, to be part of a family, to have his achievements recognized. In *Dracula,* he wrote of a changing world he feared; he died with a sense of failure and regret. His novel achieved prominence long before its author.

It took until 1983 for *Dracula* to earn recognition in the Classics series published by Oxford University Press. It took a decade more for Stoker to be included in the revered *Dictionary of National Biography,* the scholarly enterprise that the original editor—Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen—set in motion in 1882. At his death in 1912 Stoker was not deemed worthy of inclusion in that decade's supplement. Since then letters supporting his candidacy, as well as others, accumulated in filing cabinets. In 1993 a special supplement, appropriately called *Missing Persons,* was devoted to 1,086 individuals—selected from 100,000 names—unjustly absent from previous editions.

Bram Stoker deserves a new version of his life. Biographical facts previously exaggerated or misconstrued need correcting, Stoker's role in molding the modern theatre needs recording, and the link between the author's life and his fiction can now be documented. Stoker is no longer among the missing.

Contents

Introduction *ix*

Prologue *3*

1 DUBLIN DREAMS (1847–1878)

1 *The Dreamer* *13*
2 *Trinity Man* *29*
3 *Drama Critic* *48*
4 *Henry Irving* *70*

2 LONDON LIMELIGHT (1878–1884)

5 *The Lyceum* *91*
6 *First Nights* *107*
7 *The Beefsteak Room* *123*
8 *America* *146*

3 LITERARY OVERTURES (1884–1895)

9 *Mephistopheles* *173*
10 *The Bloody Play* *193*
11 *The Occult* *211*
12 *Cruden Bay* *233*

4 DRACULA'S SECRETS (1895–1912)

13 *Shaw's Dilemma* 251
14 *Dracula Debuts* 269
15 *Farewells* 289
16 *The Last Wave* 307

Epilogue 323

Acknowledgments 333
Notes 335
Selected Bibliography 359
Index 365
Photographic and Illustration Credits 377

Bram Stoker

Prologue

On a rainy December evening in 1876, Henry Irving invited the theatre critic of Dublin's *Evening Mail* to dine with him in his suite at the Shelbourne Hotel, overlooking St. Stephen's Green. Over breakfast that morning, Irving had read Bram Stoker's review of his *Hamlet* at the Theatre Royal and asked to meet the young man. The Shelbourne then—as now—was Dublin's premier hotel, a dowager empress affording the amenities guests had come to expect from the grand hotels of London and Paris. In the lobby there was the cool, musty smell of polished brass and the warm, sweet scent of oiled wood. Stoker knew the hotel from his student days at nearby Trinity College, when awards ceremonies were held in its banquet halls, shimmering with gold and crystal.

Now that Irving was celebrated in London, he was able to turn his back on the shabby, stale rooms of his provincial touring days. Stoker, who had seen the actor only through the illusion of makeup and gaslight, was greeted by a lanky figure with the outward appearance of a benevolent, bespectacled country parson; few knew that Irving was extremely shortsighted and found his way about the stage by instinct.

Irving lacked formal education and had an unacceptable West Country accent from Cornwall, where he spent his youth. He was often nervous when thrust into groups, always fearful of making a gaffe; but in conversation with one other person, his power flowed unrestrained. After a welcoming glass of champagne, Irving compli-

mented Stoker on his review, particularly his comments on the nuances of Hamlet's parting speech to Ophelia. "To give strong grounds for belief, where the instinct can judge more truly than the intellect," Stoker had written, "is the perfection of suggestive acting." With this insight, Stoker revealed to Irving his understanding of the actor's interpretation of the moody Dane. Irving had "unearthed the great, deep underlying idea of Hamlet as a mystic."

Stoker was flattered. He had fallen under Irving's spell a decade earlier, when he first saw him as Captain Absolute in *The Rivals;* now the actor had made the leap from the provinces to the London stage. As Irving paced back and forth in sequences of three steps, gesticulating and blowing swirls of musky cigar smoke up and around the frescoed ceiling, he told Stoker his dream: he wanted to make acting as honorable as law or medicine—and he wanted his own theatre.

Stoker later learned that Irving had an almost mystical regard for the number three. If a role called for an object or person to be touched, he would tap three times; when moving toward another actor on stage, he advanced three measured steps. This evening as he thrice-paced, as the decanter emptied and the cigars turned to ash, the thirty-eight-year-old actor warmed to the husky, russet-haired Irishman who looked quizzical at the right moments and kept up with his host's hedonistic consumption of port and tobacco. The hours passed swiftly. It was a perfect evening, and for the first of many evenings to come, actor and acolyte talked until daybreak. When Stoker stumbled out of the Shelbourne into the dawn drizzle, dazzled by Irving's hypnotic intensity, he wondered what the encounter had meant.

Any understanding of Bram Stoker's life and the reason he wrote *Dracula* begins with this first meeting. Stoker did not know it then, but he had been chosen; later he would be tested. Loyal, clever, but incapable of intrigue, Stoker was perfectly cast to serve Irving's extravagant ambitions. Years later, after Irving's death, Stoker emotionally recalled of these hours how his "host's heart was from the beginning something toward me, as mine had been toward him,"

how Irving sought "to prove himself again to his new, sympathetic and understanding friend," how the evening marked the beginning of a friendship that "only terminated with Irving's life—if indeed friendship, like any other form of love, can ever terminate."

Even more prophetic than the camaraderie forged that wet and chilly December evening was something Stoker would never admit: on that night he met Count Dracula. Irving as Dracula would grow into the evil paternal role, the most felicitous ever written for him. Already imprinted on Stoker's imagination were the other leading parts, the doubles of his life. The good-father figure, Abraham Van Helsing, repository of worldly wisdom, doctor, barrister, and psychic detective, was appropriately named after Stoker's father and himself. The twenty-nine-year-old was still cultivating his alter ego, Jonathan Harker, the passionless solicitor who heroically achieves manhood when he slits Dracula's throat with a great Kukri knife. Stoker and his mother, Charlotte, inform the brave and loyal Mina; while the frivolous and fragile Lucy, yearning to marry all her suitors, echoes Stoker's socially ambitious fiancée, Florence Balcombe.

Stoker projected himself into all of Dracula's major characters. It is his most autobiographical novel. By 1890, according to his notes, he was primed to throw his fictional family into a Freudian vortex, bristling with repression and apprehension of homosexuality, devouring women, and rejecting mothers. One modern critic called it "a kind of incestuous, necrophilious, oral-anal-sadistic all-in-all wrestling match." Stoker's most revealing scene, from a biographical point of view, depicts Harker in a dreamlike state, anticipating the kisses of three vampire women:

> All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. . . . They whispered together, and then they all three laughed—such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips. It was like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water-glasses when played on by a cunning hand. The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on. One said: