

Daughters of Darkness;

Edited by Pam Keesey; Cleis Press

Moira

I was raised on the movie image of the vampire, always male, poised in a respectable tux, as he lured the female, a scantily clad victim, with his mesmerizing voice and dark eyes, into the lonely night garden. This image was further engraved by Barnabas Collins in my daily afternoon soap watching of *Dark Shadows*. Years later, with an almost religious fever, I read through all of Ann Rice's vampire chronicles. Along with most of the vampire cult, my partner and I were mesmerized by the character Lestat and his companions. Again we were looking through the male vampire's eyes. We found several references to J. Sheridan LeFanu's Camilla, but couldn't locate a copy. We happily discovered the story in a recent anthology *Daughters of Darkness*, edited by Pam Keesey.

Camilla was first published in 1871, several years before Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. It is written very much in the 19th century style, at moments pastoral and then foreboding, wonderfully meshed in rich language and images. Our young vampire, Camilla, declares to innocent Laura in a ominous speech, "You are mine, you shall be mine, and you and I are one forever." Laura's

response is somewhat uneasy, the sensuality of Camilla's kisses and affections confusing to her. The reader enters Laura's thoughts, "My strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheeks in kisses."

Erotic language for an author from 1871. Reflecting the attitudes of Victorian society, this often mistrusting tale of female sexuality continues into a vampire nightmare. As Camilla seems to be growing stronger, our heirone Laura is collapsing into poor health. She is filled with strange dreams. "Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips had kissed me, longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself." It is not until the end of the story that all the pieces fit and the true nature of Camilla is exposed. Truly a well crafted short story, we enter the

intrigue, suspense and passion of the lesbian vamp.

Another story in the collection equally riveting is Jewelle Gomez's *Louisiana: 1850*. The story of a poor, runaway slave girl of African descent, who's first encounter with blood is stabbing to death a white man as he attempts to rape her. As he falls onto her, his blood pools and flows all over her, as warm bath water does. In her escape from plantation life, she is taken in by the compassionate vampire, Gilda. Here the reader enters the old establishment of Gilda and Bird, clearly lovers, vampires, and madams of the brothel. The girl is unnamed, allowing any of us to claim her as ourselves. She is simply called The Girl. Time passes peacefully while The Girl develops into a confident young woman. In Gilda we meet a different sort; "In her life time, Gilda had killed reluctantly and infrequently. When she took the blood there was no need to take life. But she knew that there were those like her who gained power as much from the terror of their prey as from the life substance itself...Gilda was sustained by sharing blood and by maintaining the vital connection to life."

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