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Vladimir Nabokov

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Laughter in the Dark

N°37

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Translated by
Vladimir Nabokov

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ИНОСТРАННЫЙ ОТДЕЛ

PENGUIN BOOKS

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome.

It so happened that one night Albinus had a beautiful idea. True, it was not quite his own, as it had been suggested by a phrase in Conrad (not the famous Pole, but Udo Conrad who wrote the *Memoirs of a Forgetful Man* and that other thing about the old conjurer who spirited himself away at his farewell performance). In any case, he made it his own by liking it, playing with it, letting it grow upon him, and that goes to make lawful property in the free city of the mind. As an art critic and picture expert he had often amused himself by having this or that Old Master sign landscapes and faces which he, Albinus, came across in real life: it turned his existence into a fine picture gallery – delightful fakes, all of them. Then, one night, as he was giving his learned mind a holiday and writing a little essay (nothing brilliant, he was not a particularly gifted man) upon the art of the cinema, the beautiful idea came to him.

It had to do with coloured animated drawings – which had just begun to appear at the time. How fascinating it would be, he thought, if one could use this method for having some well-known picture, preferably of the Dutch

School, perfectly reproduced on the screen in vivid colours and then brought to life – movement and gesture graphically developed in complete harmony with their static state in the picture, say, a pot-house with little people drinking lustily at wooden tables and a sunny glimpse of a courtyard with saddled horses – all suddenly coming to life with that little man in red putting down his tankard, this girl with the tray wrenching herself free, and a hen beginning to peck on the threshold. It could be continued by having the little figures come out and then pass through the landscape of the same painter, with, perhaps, a brown sky and a frozen canal, and people on the quaint skates they used then, sliding about in the old-fashioned curves suggested by the picture; or a wet road in the mist and a couple of riders – finally, returning to the same tavern, little by little bringing the figures and light into the self-same order, settling them down, so to speak, and ending it all with the first picture. Then, too, you could try the Italians: the blue cone of a hill in the distance, a white looping path, little pilgrims winding their way upward. And even religious subjects perhaps, but only those with small figures. And the designer would not only have to possess a thorough knowledge of the given painter and his period, but be blessed with talent enough to avoid any clash between the movements produced and those fixed by the Old Master: he would have to work them out from the picture – oh, it could be done. And the colours . . . they would be sure to be far more sophisticated than those of animated cartoons. What a tale might be told, the tale of an artist's vision, the happy journey of eye and brush, and a world in that artist's manner suffused with the tints he himself had found!

After a while he happened to speak of it to a film-producer, but the latter was not in the least excited: he said it would entail a delicacy of work calling for novel

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improvements in the method of animation, and would cost a whole lot of money; he said such a film, owing to its laborious designing, could not reasonably run longer than several minutes; that even then it would bore most people to death and be a general disappointment.

Then Albinus discussed it with another cinema man, and he too pooh-poohed the whole business. 'We could begin by something quite simple,' said Albinus, 'a stained window coming to life, animated heraldry, a little saint or two.'

'I'm afraid it's no good,' said the other. 'We can't risk fancy pictures.'

But Albinus still clung to his idea. Eventually he was told of a clever fellow, Axel Rex, who was a wonderful hand at freaks – had, as a matter of fact, designed a Persian fairy tale which had delighted highbrows in Paris and ruined the man who had financed the venture. So Albinus tried to see him, but learned that he had just returned to the States, where he was drawing cartoons for an illustrated paper. After some time Albinus managed to get in touch with him and Rex seemed interested.

Upon a certain day in March, Albinus got a long letter from him, but its arrival coincided with a sudden crisis in Albinus's private – very private – life, so that the beautiful idea, which otherwise would have lingered on and perhaps found a wall on which to hang and blossom, had strangely faded and shrivelled in the course of the last week.

Rex wrote that it was hopeless to go on trying to seduce the Hollywood people and coolly went on to suggest that Albinus, being a man of means, should finance his idea himself; in which case he, Rex, would accept a fee of so much (a startling sum), with half of it payable in advance, for designing say a Breughel film – the *Proverbs* for instance, or anything else Albinus might like to have him set in motion.

'If I were you,' remarked Albinus's brother-in-law Paul, a stout good-natured man with the clasps of *two* pencils and *two* fountain pens edging his breast-pocket, 'I should risk it. Ordinary films cost more – I mean those with wars and buildings crumpling up.'

'Oh, but then you get it all back, and I wouldn't.'

'I seem to recall,' said Paul, puffing at his cigar (they were finishing supper), 'that you proposed sacrificing a considerable amount – hardly less than the fee he requires. Why, what's the matter? You don't look as enthusiastic as you were a little while ago. You aren't giving it up, are you?'

'Well, I don't know. It's the practical side that rather bothers me; otherwise I do still like my idea.'

'What idea?' inquired Elisabeth.

That was a little habit of hers – asking questions about things that had already been exhaustively discussed in her presence. It was sheer nervousness on her part, not obtuseness or lack of attention; and more often than not while still asking her question, sliding helplessly down the sentence, she would herself realize that she knew the answer all the time. Her husband was aware of this little habit and it never annoyed him; on the contrary, it touched and amused him. He would calmly go on with the talk, well knowing (and rather looking forward to it) that presently she would supply the answer to her own question. But on this particular March day Albinus was in such a state of irritation, confusion, misery, that suddenly his nerves gave way.

'Just dropped from the moon?' he inquired roughly, and his wife glanced at her fingernails and said soothingly:

'Oh yes, I remember now.'

Then turning to eight-year-old Irma who was messily devouring a plateful of chocolate cream, she cried:

'Not so fast, dear, please, not so fast.'

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'I consider,' began Paul, puffing at his cigar, 'that every new invention—'

Albinus, his queer emotions riding him, thought: 'What the devil do I care for this fellow Rex, this idiotic conversation, this chocolate cream . . . ? I'm going mad and nobody knows it. And I can't stop, it's hopeless trying, and tomorrow I'll go there again and sit like a fool in that darkness . . . Incredible.'

Certainly it was incredible – the more so as in all the nine years of his married life he had curbed himself, had never, never— 'As a matter of fact,' he thought, 'I ought to tell Elisabeth about it; or just go away with her for a little while; or see a psycho-analyst; or else . . .'

No, you can't take a pistol and plug a girl you don't even know, simply because she attracts you.

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