



VLADIMIR
NABOKOV

LAUGHTER
IN THE
DARK

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Laughter in the Dark

by
Vladimir Nabokov

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ONCE upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, and 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 conjuror 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 had never been painted by Albinus, came across in real life: it turned his existence into a fine picture gallery—delightful fakes and all of them. Then, one night, as he was giving his learned mind a holiday and writing a little essay (nothing very 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 colored 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 pictures, preferably of the Dutch School, perfectly reproduced on the screen in vivid colors 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. The scene 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 use in winter, 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 lights back into the selfsame order, settling them down, so to speak, and ending it all with the first picture. The same, 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 by the animation and those fixed by the old master: he would have to work them out from the picture—oh, it could be done. And the colors ... 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 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

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, an 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 the highbrows in Paris and ruined the man who had financed the venture. So Albinus tried to see him, but he 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’ private—very private—life, so that the beautiful idea, which otherwise would have lingered on and perhaps found a wall on which to cling and blossom, had strangely faded and shriveled 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’ 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 shouldn’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.”

“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 psychoanalyst; or else ...”

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

ALBINUS had never been very lucky in affairs of the heart. Although he was good-looking, in a quite well-bred way, he somehow failed to derive any practical benefit from his appeal to women—for there was decidedly something very appealing about his pleasant smile and the mild blue eyes which bulged a little when he was thinking hard (and as he had a slowish mind this occurred more often than it should). He was a good talker, with just that very slight hesitation in his speech, the best part of a stammer, which lends fresh charm to the stalest sentence. Last but not least (for he lived in a smug German world) he had been left a soundly invested fortune by his father; yet, still, romance had a trick of becoming flat when it came his way.

In his student days he had had a tedious liaison of the heavyweight variety with a sad elderly lady who later, during the War, had sent out to him at the front purple socks, tickly woollies and enormous passionate letters written at top speed in a wild illegible hand on parchment paper. Then there had been that affair with the Herr Professor's wife met on the Rhine; she was pretty, when viewed at a certain angle and in a certain light, but so cold and coy that he soon gave her up. Finally, in Berlin just before his marriage, there had been a lean dreary woman with a homely face who used to come every Saturday night and was wont to relate all her past in detail, repeating the same damned thing over and over again, sighing wearily in his embraces and always rounding off with the one French phrase she knew: "*C'est la vie.*" Blunders, gropings, disappointment; surely the Cupid serving him was lefthanded, with a weak chin and no imagination. And alongside of these feeble romances there had been hundreds of girls of whom he had dreamed but whom he had never got to know; they had just slid past him, leaving for a day or two that hopeless sense of loss which makes beauty what it is: a distant lone tree against golden heavens; ripples of light on the inner curve of a bridge; a thing quite impossible to capture.

He married, but, though he loved Elisabeth after a manner, she failed to give him the thrill for which he had grown weary with longing. She was the daughter of a well-known theatrical manager, a willowy, wispy, fair-haired girl with colorless eyes and pathetic little pimples just above that kind of small nose which English lady novelists call "*retroussée*" (note the second "e" added for safety). Her skin was so delicate that the least touch left a pink spot on it, slow to fade.

He married her because it just happened so. A trip to the mountains in her company, plus her father's brother and a remarkably athletic female cousin who, thank God, finally sprained an ankle in Pontresina, was chiefly responsible for their union. There was something so dainty, so airy about Elisabeth, and she had such a good-natured laugh. They were married in Munich in order to escape the onslaught of their many Berlin acquaintances. The chestnuts were in full bloom. A much treasured cigarette case was lost in a forgotten garden. One of the waiters at the hotel could speak several languages. Elisabeth proved to have a tender little scar—the result of appendicitis.

She was a clinging little soul, docile and gentle. Her love was of the lily variety; but now and then it burst into flame and at such times Albinus was deluded into thinking that he had no need of any other love-mate.

When she became pregnant her eyes took on a vacant expression of contentment, as if she were contemplating that new inner world of hers; her careless walk changed to a careful waddle and she would greedily devour handfuls of snow which she hurriedly scooped up when no one was looking.

Albinus did his best to look after her; took her out on long slow strolls; saw that she went to bed early and that household things with awkward corners were gentle to her when she moved about; but at night he dreamed of coming across a young girl lying asprawl on a hot lonely beach and in that dream a sudden fear would seize him of being caught by his wife. In the morning Elisabeth considered her swollen body in the wardrobe mirror and smiled a satisfied and mysterious smile. Then one day she was taken to a nursing home and Albinus lived for three weeks alone. He did not know what to do with himself; took a good deal of brandy; was tortured by two dark thoughts, each of a different kind in their darkness: one was that his wife might die, and the other that if only he had a little more pluck he might find a friendly girl and bring her back to his empty bedroom.

Would the child ever be born? Albinus walked up and down the long, whitewashed, white-enameled passage with that nightmare palm in a pot at the top of the stairs; he hated it, hated the hopeless whiteness of the place and the ruddy-cheeked rustling hospital nurses with white-winged heads who kept trying to drive him away. At length the assistant surgeon emerged and said gloomily: "Well, it's all over." Before Albinus' eyes there appeared a fine dark rain like the flickering of some very old film (1910, a brisk jerky funeral procession with legs moving too fast). He rushed into the sickroom where Elisabeth had been happily delivered of a daughter.

The baby was at first red and wrinkled like a toy balloon on its decline. Soon, however, her face smoothed out and after a year she began to speak. Now, at the age of eight, she was far less voluble for she had inherited her mother's reserved nature. Her gaiety, too, was like her mother's—a singular unobtrusive gaiety. It was just a quiet delight in one's own existence with a faint note of humorous surprise at being alive at all—yes, that was the tenor of it: mortal gaiety.

And throughout all these years Albinus remained faithful, with the duality of his feelings puzzling him a good deal. He felt that he loved his wife sincerely, tenderly—as much in fact as he was capable of loving a human being; and he was perfectly frank with her in everything except that secret foolish craving, that dream, that lust burning a hole in his life. She read all the letters which he wrote and received, liked to know the details of his business—especially those connected with the handling of old somber pictures, amid the cracks of which could be detected the white croup of a horse or a dusty smile. They had some very delightful trips abroad, and many beautifully soft evenings at home when he sat with her on the balcony high above the blue streets with the wires and chimneys drawn in India ink across the sunset, and reflected that he was really happy beyond his deserts.

One evening (a week before the talk about Axel Rex) he noticed on the way to a café where he had a business appointment that his watch was running amok (it was not the first time either) and that he had a full hour, a free gift to be used in some way. It was of course absurd to go back home to the other end of the town, yet neither did he feel disposed to sit and wait: the sight of other men with girlfriends always upset him. He strolled about aimlessly and came to a small cinema the lights of which shed a scarlet sheen over the snow. He glanced at the poster (which portrayed a man looking up at a window framing a child in a nightshirt), hesitated—and bought a ticket.

Hardly had he entered the velvety darkness when the oval beam of an electric torch glided toward him (as usually happens) and no less swiftly and smoothly led him down the dark and gently sloping gangway. Just as the light fell on the ticket in his hand, Albinus saw the girl's inclined face and then, as he walked behind her, he dimly distinguished her very slight figure and the even swiftness of her dispassionate movements. Whilst shuffling into his seat he looked up at her and saw again the limping gleam of her eye as it chanced to catch the light and the melting outline of a cheek which looked, though it were painted by a great artist against a rich dark background. There was nothing very much out of the common about all this: such things had happened to him before and he knew that it would

unwise to dwell upon it. She moved away and was lost in the darkness and he suddenly felt bored and sad. ~~He had come in at the end of a film: a girl was receding among tumbled furniture before a masked man with a gun. There was no interest whatever in watching happenings which he could not understand since he had not yet seen their beginning.~~

In the pause as soon as the lights were turned on he noticed her again: she was standing at the exit next to a horribly purple curtain which she had just drawn to one side, and the outgoing people were surging past her. She was holding one hand in the pocket of her short embroidered apron and her black frock fitted her very tightly about the arms and bosom. He stared at her face almost in dread. It was pale, sulky, painfully beautiful face. He guessed her age to be about eighteen.

Then, when the place had almost emptied and fresh people began to shuffle sideways along the rows, she passed to and fro, quite near to him several times; but he turned away because it hurt to look and because he could not help remembering how many times beauty—or what he called beauty—had passed him by and vanished.

For another half hour he sat in the darkness, his prominent eyes fixed on the screen. Then he rose and walked away. She drew the curtain aside for him with a slight clatter of wooden rings.

“Oh, but I will have one more look,” thought Albinus miserably.

It seemed to him that her lips twitched a little. She let the curtain fall.

Albinus stepped into a blood-red puddle; the snow was melting, the night was damp, with the faint colors of street lights all running and dissolving. “Argus”—good name for a cinema.

After three days he could ignore the memory of her no longer. He felt ridiculously excited as he entered the place once more—again in the middle of something. All was exactly as it had been the first time: the gliding torch, the long Luini-esque eyes, the swift walk in the darkness, the pretentious movement of her black-sleeved arm as she clicked the curtain to one side. “Any normal man would know what to do,” thought Albinus. A car was spinning down a smooth road with hairpin turns between cliff and abyss.

As he left, he tried to catch her eye, but failed. There was a steady downpour outside and the pavement glowed crimson.

Had he not gone there that second time he might perhaps have been able to forget this ghost of an adventure, but now it was too late. He went there a third time firmly resolved to smile at her—and what a desperate leer it would have been, had he achieved it. As it was, his heart thumped so that he missed his chance.

And the next day Paul came to dinner, they discussed the Rex affair, little Irma gobbled up her chocolate cream and Elisabeth asked her usual questions.

“Just dropped from the moon?” he asked, and then tried to make up for his nastiness by a belated titter.

After dinner he sat by his wife’s side on the broad sofa, pecked at her with little kisses while she looked at gowns and things in a women’s magazine, and dully he thought to himself:

“Damn it all, I’m happy, what more do I need? That creature gliding about in the dark.... Like a bird, I could crush her beautiful throat. Well, she is dead anyway, since I shan’t go there any more.”

SHE was called Margot Peters. Her father was a house-porter who had been badly shellshocked in the War: his gray head jerked unceasingly as if in constant confirmation of grievance and woe, and he fell into a violent passion on the slightest provocation. Her mother was still youngish, but rather battered too—a coarse callous woman whose red palm was a perfect cornucopia of blows. Her head was generally tied up in a kerchief to keep the dust from her hair during work, but after her great Saturday clean-up—which was mainly effected by means of a vacuum cleaner ingeniously connected to the lift—she dressed herself up and sallied forth to pay visits. She was unpopular with the tenants on account of her insolence and the vicious way she had of ordering people to wipe their feet on the mat. The Staircase was the main idol of her existence—not as a symbol of glorious ascension, but as a thing to be kept nicely polished, so that her worst nightmare (after too generous a helping of potatoes and sauerkraut) was a flight of white steps with the black trace of a boot first right, then left, then right again and so on—up to the top landing. A poor woman indeed, and no object for derision.

Otto, Margot's brother, was three years her senior. He worked in a bicycle factory, despised his father's tame republicanism, held forth on politics in the neighboring pub and declared as he banged his fist on the table: "The first thing a man must have is a full belly." This was his guiding principle—and quite a sound one too.

As a child Margot went to school, and there she had her ears boxed rather less frequently than at home. A kitten's commonest movement is a soft little jump coming in sudden series; hers was a sharp raising of her left elbow to protect her face. In spite of all, she grew up into a bright and high-spirited girl. When only eight she joined with much gusto in the screaming, scraping games of football which schoolboys played in the middle of the street using a rubber ball the size of an orange. At ten she learned to ride her brother's bicycle. Bare-armed, with black pigtails flying, she scorched up and down the pavement; then halted with one foot resting on the curbstone, pensively. At twelve she became less boisterous. Those were the days when she liked nothing better than to stand at the door and chatter in undertones with the coalman's daughter, exchanging views upon the women who visited one of the lodgers, and discussing passing hats. Once she found on the staircase a shabby handbag containing a small cake of almond soap with a thin curved hair adhering to it, and half-a-dozen very queer photographs. On another occasion the redhaired boy who always used to trip her up at play kissed her on the nape of the neck. Then one night she had a fit of hysterics, for which she got a dousing of cold water followed by a sound wallop.

A year later she had grown remarkably pretty, wore a short red frock and was mad on the movies. Afterward she remembered this period of her life with a strange oppressive feeling—the light, warm, peaceful evenings; the sound of the shops being bolted for the night; her father sitting astride on his chair outside the door, smoking his pipe and jerking his head; her mother, arms akimbo; the lilac bus leaning over the railing, Frau von Brock going home with her purchases in a green string-bag; Martha the maid waiting to cross with the greyhound and two wire-haired terriers.... It grew darker. Her brother would come along with a couple of burly comrades who gathered round and jostled against her, plucking at her bare arms. One of them had eyes like the film actor Veidt. The street, with the upper stories of the houses still bathed in yellow light, grew quite silent. Only, across the way, two baldheaded men were playing cards on a balcony, and every guffaw and thump was audible.

When she was barely sixteen she became friendly with the girl who served behind the counter of a small stationery shop at the corner. This girl's young sister was already earning a decent living as an artist's model. So Margot dreamed of becoming a model, and then a film star. This transition seemed to her quite a simple matter: the sky was there, ready for her star. At about the same time she learned to dance, and now and then went with the shopgirl to the "Paradise" dance hall where elderly men made her extremely frank proposals to the crash and whine of a jazz band.

One day, as she was standing at the corner of the street, a fellow on a red motorcycle, whom she had observed once or twice already, drew up suddenly and offered her a ride. He had flaxen hair combed back and his shirt billowed behind, still full of the wind he had gathered.

She smiled, got up behind him, arranged her skirt and next moment was traveling at a terrific speed with his tie flying in her face. He took her outside the city and there halted. It was a sunny evening and a little party of midges were continuously darning the air in one spot. It was all very quiet: the quietude of pine and heather. He alighted and as he sat by her side at the edge of a ditch he told her that last year he had pushed on to Spain, just like this. Then he put his arm round her and began to squeeze and fumble and kiss her so violently that the discomfort she felt that day turned to dizziness. She wriggled free and began to cry. "You may kiss me," she sobbed, "but not that way, please." The youth shrugged his shoulders, started his engine, ran, jumped, swerved and was gone; leaving her sitting on a milestone. She returned home on foot. Otto, who had seen her go off, thumped his fist down on her neck and then kicked her skilfully, so that she fell and bruised herself against the sewing machine.

Next winter the shopgirl's sister introduced her to Frau Levandovsky, an elderly woman of good proportions with a genteel manner, albeit marred by a certain fruitiness of speech, and a large purple blotch on her cheek the size of a hand: she used to explain it by her mother's having been frightened by a fire whilst expecting her. Margot moved to a small servant's room in her flat, and her parents were thankful to be rid of her, the more so as they considered that any job was sanctified by the money it brought in; and fortunately her brother, who liked to speak in threatening terms of capitalists buying the daughters of the poor, was away for a time, working at Breslau.

First Margot posed in the classroom of a girls' school; then, later on, in a real studio where she was drawn not only by women, but by men also, most of whom were quite young. With her sleek black hair nicely cut, she sat on a small rug, stark naked, her feet curled under her, leaning on her blue veined arm, her slim back (with a sheen of fine down between the pretty shoulders, one of which was raised to her flaming cheek) bent slightly forward in a semblance of wistful weariness; she watched askance the students lift and lower their eyes and heard the faint whir and grating of carbon pencils shading this curve or that. Out of sheer boredom she used to pick out the best-looking man and throw him a dark liquid glance whenever he raised his face with its parted lips and puckered forehead. She never succeeded in changing the color of his attention, and this vexed her. Before, when she had pictured herself sitting thus, alone in a pool of light, exposed to so many eyes, she had fancied that it would be rather exhilarating. But it made her stiff, that was all. To amuse herself she made up her face for the sitting, painted her dry hot mouth, darkened her eyelids, although indeed they were quite dark enough, and once even touched up her nipples with her lipstick. For this she got a good scolding from the Levandovsky woman.

So the days passed and Margot had only a very vague idea of what she was really aiming at, though there was always that vision of herself as a screen beauty in gorgeous furs being helped out of a gorgeous car by a gorgeous hotel porter under a giant umbrella. She was still wondering how to get into that diamond bright world straight from the faded rug in the studio, when Frau Levandovsky told

her for the first time about a lovesick young man from the provinces.

“You can’t do without a boy friend,” declared that lady complacently as she drank her coffee. “You are much too lively a lass not to need a companion, and this modest young fellow is wanting to find a pure soul in this wicked city.”

Margot was holding Frau Levandovsky’s fat yellow dachshund in her lap. She pulled up the animal’s soft silky ears so as to make their tips meet over the gentle head (inside they resembled dainty pink blotting paper, much used) and answered without looking up:

“Oh, there’s no need for that yet. I’m only sixteen, aren’t I? And what’s the use? Does it lead you anywhere? I know those fellows.”

“You’re a fool,” said Frau Levandovsky calmly. “I’m not talking to you about some scamp, but about a generous gentleman who saw you in the street and has been dreaming of you ever since.”

“Some old dodderer, I expect,” said Margot, kissing the wart on the dog’s cheek.

“Fool,” repeated Frau Levandovsky. “He is thirty, clean-shaven, distinguished, with a silk tie and a gold cigarette holder.”

“Come, come for a walk,” said Margot to the dog, and the dachshund slipped from her lap to the floor with a plop and trotted off along the passage.

Now the gentleman referred to by Frau Levandovsky was anything but a shy young man from the country. He had got in touch with her through two hearty commercial travelers with whom he had played poker on the boat train all the way from Bremen to Berlin. At first, nothing had been said about prices: the procuress had merely showed him a snapshot of a smiling girl with the sun in her eyes and a dog in her arms, and Miller (that was the name he gave) merely nodded. On the appointed day she bought some cakes and made plenty of coffee. Very shrewdly, she advised Margot to wear her old red frock. Toward six o’clock the bell rang.

“I’m not going to run any risks, I’m not,” thought Margot. “If I hate him, I’ll tell her so straight out, and if I don’t I’ll take my time to think it over.”

Unfortunately it was not such a simple matter to decide what to make of Miller. First of all, he had a striking face. His lusterless black hair, carelessly brushed back, longish and with an odd dry look about it, was certainly not a wig, although it looked uncommonly like one. His cheeks seemed hollow because the cheekbones protruded so, and their skin was dull white as if coated with a thin layer of powder. His sharp twinkling eyes and those funny three-cornered nostrils which made one think of a lynx were never still for a moment; not so the heavy lower half of his face with the two motionless furrows at the corners of the mouth. His attire seemed rather foreign: that very blue shirt with a bright blue tie, that dark blue suit with enormously wide trousers. He was tall and slim and his square shoulders moved splendidly as he picked his way among Frau Levandovsky’s plush furniture. Margot had pictured him quite differently and now she sat there with arms tightly crossed, feeling rather shocked and unhappy, while Miller fairly gobbled her up with his eyes. In a rasping voice he asked for her name. She told him.

“And I’m little Axel,” he said with a short laugh, and brusquely turning away from her he resumed his conversation with Frau Levandovsky: they were talking sedately of Berlin sights and he was mockingly polite with his hostess.

Then suddenly he lapsed into silence, lit a cigarette and, picking off a bit of the cigarette paper which had stuck to his full, very red lip (where was the golden holder?), said:

“An idea, dear lady. Here’s a stall for that Wagner thing; you’re certain to like it. So put on your bonnet and toddle off. Take a taxi, I’ll pay for that too.”

Frau Levandovsky thanked him, but replied with some dignity that she preferred to remain at home.

“May I have a word with you?” asked Miller, obviously annoyed, rising from his chair.

“Have some more coffee,” suggested the lady coolly.

Miller licked his chops and sat down again. Then he smiled, and in a new good-natured manner launched into a funny story about some friend of his, an opera singer who once, in the part of Lohengrin, being tight, failed to board the swan in time and waited hopefully for the next one. Margot bit her lips and then suddenly bent forward and went off into the most girlish fits of laughter. Frau Levandovsky laughed too, her large bosom quivering softly.

“Good,” thought Miller, “if the old bitch wants me to play the lovesick fool, I shall—with vengeance. I’ll do it far more thoroughly and successfully than she supposes.”

So he came next day, and then again and again. Frau Levandovsky, who had received only a small advance payment and wanted the whole sum, did not leave the pair alone for a moment. But sometimes when Margot took the dog for a walk late in the evening, Miller would suddenly emerge from the darkness and stroll along by her side. It flurried her so that she involuntarily hurried her steps, neglecting the dog, which followed with its body at a slight angle to the line of its wobbly trot. Frau Levandovsky got wind of these secret meetings and henceforth took out the dachshund herself.

More than a week passed in this manner. Then Miller resolved to act. It would have been absurd to pay the huge price demanded since he was on the point of getting what he wanted without the woman’s help. One night he told her and Margot three more funny stories, the funniest they had yet heard, drank three cups of coffee and then, walking up to Frau Levandovsky, gathered her up in his arms, rushed her into the lavatory, nimbly drew out the key, and locked the door from the outside. The poor woman was so utterly taken aback at first that for five seconds at least she did not utter a sound but then—oh, God! ...

“Pack up your things quick and come along,” said he, turning to Margot who was standing in the middle of the room with both hands pressed to her head.

He took her to a little flat which he had rented for her the day before, and no sooner had Margot crossed the threshold than she yielded with pleasure and zest to the fate which had been lying in wait for her quite long enough.

And she liked Miller enormously. There was something so satisfying about the grip of his hand and the touch of his thick lips. He did not speak to her much, but he often held her on his knees and laughed quietly as he mused over something unknown. She could not guess what he was doing in Berlin or who he really was. Nor could she find out his hotel; and when she once tried searching his pockets, he gave her such a rap on the knuckles that she decided to do it better next time, but he was much too careful. Whenever he went out she was afraid that he would never come back; otherwise she was extraordinarily happy and hoped they would always be together. Now and then he gave her something—silk stockings, a powder puff—nothing very expensive. But he would take her to good restaurants and to the pictures and to a café afterward, and once, when she gasped as a famous film actor sat down a couple of tables away from them, he looked up at the man and they exchanged greetings, which made her gasp all the more sweetly.

He, for his part, developed such a taste for Margot that often, when he was on the point of going, he would suddenly shove his hat into a corner (incidentally, she had discovered from its inside that he had been to New York) and decided to stay. All this lasted for exactly one month. Then one morning he got up earlier than he usually did and said that he had to leave. She asked him for how long. He stared at her and then walked up and down the room in his purple pyjamas, rubbing his hands as though he were washing them.

“Forever, I guess,” he said suddenly, and he began to dress without looking at her. She thought that

he might be joking, kicked off the bedclothes, as the room was very hot, and turned her face to the wall.

“Pity I haven’t a photo of you,” he said as he stamped into his shoes.

Then she heard him pack and lock the small suitcase he used for the odds and ends he brought to the flat. After a few minutes he said:

“Don’t move and don’t look round.”

She did not stir. What was he doing? She twitched her bare shoulder.

“Don’t move,” he repeated.

For a couple of minutes there was silence except for a faint grating sound which somehow seemed familiar.

“Now you may turn,” he said.

But Margot still lay motionless. He walked up to her, kissed her ear and went out quickly. The kiss sang in her ear for quite a while.

She lay in bed the whole day. He never came back.

Next morning she received a wire from Bremen: “Rooms paid till July adieu sweet devil.”

“Good Heavens, how shall I do without him?” said Margot aloud. She leaped to the window, flung open and was about to throw herself out. But at that moment a red-and-gold fire engine drove up snorting loudly, and stopped in front of the house opposite. A crowd had collected, clouds of smoke billowed from the top window, and black scraps of charred paper floated in the wind. She was so interested in the fire that she forgot her intention.

She had very little money left. In her distress she went to a dance hall as abandoned damsels do in films. Two Japanese gentlemen accosted her and, as she had taken more cocktails than were good for her, she agreed to spend the night with them. Next morning she demanded two hundred marks. The Japanese gentlemen gave her three fifty in small change and hustled her out. She resolved to be more wary in the future.

At a bar one night a fat old man with a nose like an overripe pear put his wrinkled hand on her silken knee and said wistfully:

“Glad to meet you again, Dora. Do you still remember what fun we had last summer?”

She laughed and replied that he had made a mistake. The old man asked her with a sigh what she would drink. Then he drove her home and became so beastly in the darkness of the car that she jumped out. He followed her and almost in tears begged her to meet him again. She gave him her telephone number. When he had paid for her room till November and had also given her enough money to buy a fur coat, she allowed him to stay for the night. He was a comfortable bedfellow, dropping fast asleep the moment he had stopped wheezing. Then he failed to keep an appointment, and when at last she rang up his office she was told that he was dead.

She sold her fur coat and the money kept her until the spring. Two days before this transaction she felt an ardent longing to display herself to her parents in her splendor, so she drove past the house in a taxicab. It was a Saturday and her mother was polishing the handle of the front door. When she saw her daughter, she stopped dead. “Well, I never!” she exclaimed with much feeling. Margot smiled silently, got back into the cab and through the back window saw her brother come running out of the house. He bawled something after her and shook his fist.

She took a cheaper room. Half undressed, her little feet shoeless, she would sit on the edge of her bed in the gathering darkness and smoke endless cigarettes. Her landlady, a sympathetic body, dropped in now and then for a soulful chat and one day told Margot that a cousin of hers owned a little cinema which was doing quite well. The winter seemed colder than winters used to be; Margot looked

about her for something to pawn: that sunset perhaps.

“What shall I do next?” she thought.

One raw blue morning when her courage was high she made up her face very strikingly, looked up at a film company with a promising name and succeeded in making an appointment to see the manager in his office. He turned out to be an elderly man with a black bandage over his right eye and a piercing gleam in his left. Margot began assuring him that she had played before—and very successfully.

“What picture?” asked the manager gazing benevolently at her excited face.

Boldly she mentioned a firm, a film. The man was silent. Then he closed his left eye (it would have been a wink, had the other been visible) and said:

“Lucky for you that you came across me. Another in my place might have been tempted by your ... er ... youth to make you heaps of fine promises and—well, you’d have gone the way of a lot of flesh, never to become the silver ghost of romance—at least of that special brand of romance which we deal in. I am, as you may observe, no longer young, and what I haven’t seen of life isn’t worth seeing. My daughter, I imagine, is older than you. And for that reason I would like to tell you something, my dear child. You have never been an actress and in all likelihood you never will be. Go home, think it over, talk to your parents if you are on speaking terms with them, which I doubt ...”

Margot slapped the edge of the desk with her glove, stood up and stalked out, her face distorted with fury.

Another company had its office in the same building, but there she was not even admitted. Full of wrath she made her way home. Her landlady boiled her two eggs and patted her shoulders, which Margot ate greedily, angrily. Then the good woman fetched some brandy and two small glasses, filled them with a shaky hand, carefully corked the bottle and carried it away.

“Here’s to your good luck,” she said, seating herself again at the rickety table. “Everything’ll be all right, my dear. I’ll be seeing my cousin tomorrow and we’ll have a chat about you.”

The chat was quite a success, and at first Margot enjoyed her new occupation, though it was, of course, a little humiliating to start her film career in *that* way. Three days later she felt as though she had done nothing else all her life but show groping people to their seats. On Friday, however, there was a change of program and that cheered her up. She stood in the darkness leaning against the wall and watched Greta Garbo. But after a while she was fed up for good. Another week went by. A man coming out lingered by the exit and glanced at her with a shy helpless expression. After two or three nights he returned. He was perfectly dressed and his blue eyes stared at her hungrily.

“Quite a decent-looking fellow, though rather on the dull side,” mused Margot.

Then, when he turned up for the fourth or fifth time—and certainly not for the sake of the picture because it was the same—she felt a faint thrill of pleasant excitement.

But how timid he was, that fellow! As she was leaving for home one night, she noticed him on the other side of the street. She walked slowly on without looking round, but with the corners of her eyes folded back like the ears of a rabbit: expecting that he would follow her. But he did not—he simply faded away. Then, when he came again to the “Argus” there was a wan, morbid, very interesting look about him. Her work over, Margot tripped out into the street; stopped; opened her umbrella. There he was standing again on the opposite sidewalk and calmly she crossed over to him. But when he saw her approaching, he at once began to walk away.

He felt silly and sick. He knew that she was behind and so was afraid to walk too fast lest he should lose her; but then, too, he was afraid to slacken his pace lest she should overtake him. At the next street-crossing he was obliged to wait while car after car sped past him. Here she overtook him, all but slipped under a bicycle van and jumped back, colliding with him. He grasped her thin elbow and the

crossed together.

~~“Now it has started,” thought Albinus, awkwardly adjusting his stride to hers—he had never walked with so small a woman.~~

“You’re drenched,” she said with a smile. He took the umbrella out of her hand; she pressed still closer to him. For a moment he feared that his heart might burst, but then suddenly something relaxed delightfully as though he had caught the tune of his ecstasy, this moist ecstasy drumming, drumming against the taut silk overhead. Now his words came freely and he enjoyed their newborn ease.

The rain stopped, but they still walked under the umbrella. When they came to a halt at her front door, he closed the wet, shiny, beautiful thing and gave it back to her.

“Don’t go away yet,” he pleaded (holding the while one hand in his pocket and endeavoring to push off his wedding ring with his thumb). “Don’t,” he repeated (it came off).

“Getting late,” she said, “my aunt will be angry.”

He seized her by the wrists and with the violence of shyness tried to kiss her, but she ducked and his lips met only her velvet cap.

“Let me go,” she murmured, her head lowered. “You know you ought not to do that.”

“But don’t go,” he cried. “I have no one in the world but you.”

“I can’t, I can’t,” she answered, and turning the key in the lock she pressed against the great door with her small shoulder.

“I shall wait for you again tomorrow,” said Albinus.

She smiled at him through the glass pane and then ran down the dim passage toward the back yard.

He took a deep breath, groped for his handkerchief, blew his nose, carefully buttoned, then unbuttoned, his overcoat; noticed how light and bare his hand felt and hurriedly slipped on the ring which was still quite warm.

AT HOME nothing had changed, and this seemed remarkable. Elisabeth, Irma, Paul, belonged, as were, to another period, limpid and tranquil like the backgrounds of the early Italians. Paul, after working all day at his office, liked to pass a quiet evening at his sister's home. He cherished profound respect for Albinus, for his learning and taste, for the beautiful things around him—for the spinach-green Gobelin in the dining room, a hunt in a forest.

When Albinus opened the door of his flat he felt a queer sinking in the pit of his stomach as he reflected that, in a moment, he would see his wife: would she not be able to read his perfidy in her face? For that walk in the rain was betrayal; all that had gone before had been only thoughts and dreams. Perhaps, by some dreadful mischance, his actions had been observed and reported? Perhaps he smelt of the cheap sweet scent she used? As he stepped into the hall he swiftly concocted in his mind a story that might come in handy: of a young artist, her poverty and her talent, and how he was trying to help her. But nothing had changed, neither the white door behind which his daughter was sleeping at the end of the passage, nor his brother-in-law's vast overcoat which was hanging on its coat-hanger (a special hanger wound in red silk) as calmly and respectably as ever.

He entered the sitting room. Here they were—Elisabeth in her familiar tweed dress with check pattern, Paul puffing at his cigar, and an old lady of their acquaintance, a baron's widow who had been impoverished by the inflation and now carried on a small business in rugs and pictures.... No matter what they were discussing: the rhythm of everyday life was so comforting that he felt a spasm of joy that he had not been found out.

And then later as he lay by his wife's side in their bedroom, dimly lit, quietly furnished, with, as usual, part of the central heating apparatus (painted white) reflected in the mirror, Albinus marveled at his own divided nature: his affection for Elisabeth was perfectly secure and undiminished, but at the same time there burned in his mind the thought that perhaps no later than tomorrow—yes, certainly tomorrow—

But it did not prove quite so easy. At their next meetings Margot skilfully contrived to avoid his love-making—and there was not the slightest chance of his being able to take her to a hotel. She did not tell him much about herself—only that she was an orphan, the daughter of a painter (curious coincidence, that), and lived with her aunt; that she was very hard up, but longed to give up her exhausting job.

Albinus had introduced himself to her under the hurriedly assumed name of Schiffermiller, and Margot thought bitterly: "Another Miller—already," and then: "Oh, you're lying, of course."

March was rainy. These nocturnal strolls under the umbrella tortured Albinus, so he soon suggested that they should go into a café. He selected a dingy little place where he felt sure of not meeting any acquaintances.

It was his habit when settling down at a table to lay out at once his cigarette case and lighter. On the case Margot espied his initials. She said nothing, but after a little reflection asked him to fetch her the telephone book. While he was walking toward the booth with his slow flopping gait, she took up her hat from the chair and swiftly examined its lining: there was his name (he had had it put there in order to thwart absent-minded artists at parties).

Presently he came back with the telephone directory, holding it like a Bible, smiling tenderly, and

while he was gazing at her long drooping lashes, Margot sped through the R's and found Albinus' address and his telephone number. Then she quietly closed the well-thumbed blue volume.

"Take off your coat," murmured Albinus.

Without bothering to stand up she began to wriggle out of the sleeves, inclining her pretty neck and thrusting forward first the right and then the left shoulder. As Albinus helped her, he caught a hoarse whiff of violets and saw her shoulder blades move, and the sallow skin between them ripple and smooth out again. Then she took off her hat, peered into her pocket-mirror and, wetting her forefinger, tapped the black lovelocks on her temples.

Albinus sat down beside her and looked and looked at that face in which everything was so charming—the burning cheeks, the lips glistening from the cherry brandy, the childish solemnity of the long hazel eyes and the small downy mole on the soft curve just beneath the left one.

"If I knew I should hang for it," he thought, "I would still look at her."

Even that vulgar Berlin slang of hers only enhanced the charm of her throaty voice and large white teeth. When laughing she half closed her eyes and a dimple danced on her cheek. He pawed at her little hand, but she withdrew it briskly.

"You're driving me crazy," he said.

Margot patted his cuff and said:

"Now, be a good boy."

His first thought next morning was: it can't go on like this, it just can't. I must get her a room. Curse that aunt. We shall be alone, quite alone. A textbook of love for beginners. Oh, the things I shall teach her. So young, so pure, so maddening ...

"Are you asleep?" asked Elisabeth softly.

He achieved the perfect yawn and opened his eyes. Elisabeth was seated in her pale blue nightgown on the edge of the double bed and was looking through the mail.

"Anything interesting?" asked Albinus, gazing in dull wonder at her white shoulder.

"Ach, he asks you for money again. Says his wife and his mother-in-law have been ill and the people are plotting against him. Says he can't afford to buy paints. We'll have to help him again, suppose."

"Yes, of course," said Albinus, and in his mind there formed an extraordinary, vivid picture of Margot's dead father: he, too, no doubt had been a seedy, bad-tempered and not very gifted artist, whom life had treated harshly.

"And here's an invitation to the Artists' Club. We shall have to go this time. And here's a letter from the States."

"Read it aloud," he asked.

"My dear Sir, I am afraid I have not much news to convey, but still there are a few things I should like to add to my last long letter, which, in parenthesis, you have not answered yet. As I may be coming in the Fall ..."

At that moment the telephone rang on the bedside table. "Tut, tut," said Elisabeth, and leaned forward. Albinus followed absent-mindedly the movements of her delicate fingers as they took and clasped the white receiver, and then he heard the tiny ghost of a voice squeaking at the other end.

"Oh, good morning," exclaimed Elisabeth, at the same time making a certain face at her husband, a sure sign that it was the Baroness talking, and talking a lot.

He stretched out his hand for the American letter and glanced at the date. Funny he had not yet answered the last one. Irma came in to greet her parents as she did every morning. Silently she kissed her father and then her mother, who was listening to the telephone tale with closed eyes, grunting

every now and then in misplaced assent or feigned astonishment.

~~“See that you are a very good little girl today,” whispered Albinus to his daughter. With a smile Irma disclosed a fistful of marbles.~~

She was not at all pretty; freckles covered her pale bumpy forehead, her eyelashes were much too fair, her nose too long for her face.

“By all means,” said Elisabeth, and sighed with relief as she hung up.

Albinus prepared to go on with the letter. Elisabeth held her daughter by the wrists and was telling her something funny, laughing, kissing her and giving her a little tug after every sentence. Irma went on smiling demurely, as she shuffled with her shoe on the floor. Again the telephone rang. This time Albinus attended to it.

“Good morning, Albert dear,” said a feminine voice.

“Who—” began Albinus, and suddenly he had the sickening sensation of going down a very fast lift.

“It was not particularly nice of you to give me a false name,” pursued the voice, “but I forgive you. I just wanted to tell you—”

“Wrong number,” said Albinus hoarsely, and crashed back the receiver. At the same time he reflected with dismay that Elisabeth might have heard something just as he had heard the Baroness’s minute voice.

“What was it?” she asked, “Why have you turned so red?”

“Absurd! Irma, my child, run along, don’t fidget about like that. Utterly absurd. That’s the tenth wrong call in two days. He writes that he’ll probably be coming here at the end of the year. I’ll be glad to see him.”

“Who writes?”

“Good God! You never get what one’s saying. That man from America. That fellow Rex.”

“What Rex?” asked Elisabeth unconcernedly.

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