



MODERN  
CLASSICS

# Alexander Lernet- Holenia Count Luna

'A book so  
astonishing that  
I immediately  
reread it, fearful it  
might disappear'

Patti Smith

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

*Count Luna*

Alexander Lernet-Holenia was born in Vienna in 1897. He served in the Austro-Hungarian army in the First World War and became a protégé of Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote poetry, novels and plays and was also a successful screenwriter. His books were included on the first Nazi black-list and subsequently burned, but after the end of the Second World War he again became a vital figure in Austrian cultural life.

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

ALEXANDER  
LERNET-HOLENIA

*Count Luna*

*Translated by Jane B. Greene*



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia  
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published in German as *Der Graf Luna* by Paul Zsolnay Verlag 1955

First published in English 1956

This translation published by arrangement with Adelphi Edizioni and the heirs of  
Alexander Lernet-Holenia by New Directions 2020

Published in Penguin Classics 2024

001

Text copyright © Alexander Dreihann-Holenia, 1955

Translation copyright © Jane B. Greene 1956

Set in 11.25/14pt Dante MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-64954-1

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) paper.

*Count Luna*

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

## I

On Thursday, May 6 of last year, a man by the name of Alexander Jessiersky arrived in Rome and took a room in a hotel on the Piazza di Spagna. He registered as an Austrian citizen, born in 1911, and a widower. His occupation he did not fill in, perhaps because he did not know how to translate it into Italian.

On the morning of the seventh, he booked passage on the *Aosta*, which was to sail for Buenos Aires from Naples on the evening of the ninth.

In the afternoon of the seventh, he visited various places of interest in the southern sections of Rome, including the Appian Way. Either at the Church of Domine Quo Vadis or at the nearby Temple of the Deus Rediculus – one dedicated to the Christian, the other to the pagan, deity of return – he would have done well to have taken the hint and turned back. But, unfortunately, he did not do so. He went on to the Church of Sant'Urbano, which contains a side entrance to the Catacombs of St Praetextatus.

While looking around the church, he asked the custodian whether it was true that, some time before, two French priests had entered the catacombs from the church and had never returned. The custodian replied in the affirmative; whereupon Jessiersky remarked that he planned to come back the next day and go down into the catacomb to search for the vanished priests. Jessiersky's Italian was not of the best, but the custodian managed to get the drift of what he was saying. He told

Jessiersky that he himself was not authorized to conduct him into the catacombs, nor would anyone else be willing to do so. These catacombs, he explained, were for the most part unexplored, which was doubtless why the two priests had lost their way and perished. The visitor would, therefore, do better to remain in the church looking at its famous frescoes. Jessiersky replied that he did not want a guide and would be able to find his way by himself. The custodian pointed out that by now the bodies of the two lost men must certainly be in a state of advanced decomposition, but Jessiersky cut short this and other objections with a generous tip.

The next day he came back equipped with candles, a suitcase, and a light coat and, ignoring the renewed protests of the custodian, crawled through the entrance to the catacombs beneath the altar of the lower church, pulled suitcase and coat in after him, and, like the two priests, was never seen again.

The custodian waited until evening, then he sent out an alarm to the personnel of the nearby Catacombs of St Sebastian. The personnel heaped reproaches upon him for having permitted the foreigner to enter the catacombs at all and set out at once to look for the missing man.

All attempts to find him proved unsuccessful, including the search instituted by the police and directed and supervised with the greatest care by Professors F. B. Degrassi and Innocente Bazzi, eminent authorities on subterranean Rome. It was not even possible to distinguish Jessiersky's footprints on the dusty floors of the passageways from those of others who had been there before him. The Catacombs of St Praetextatus, like those of St Sebastian, of St Calixtus, and of Domitilla, comprise, in addition to the familiar passages through which visitors are conducted every day, a maze of further passages, not entered for a very long time and said to be connected with the passages, galleries, and tomb chapels of those other catacombs that form a

wide arc about the city of Rome; the foreigner could very easily have lost his way and died of starvation.

As is well known, the Italian catacombs, and the Roman ones in particular, were the burial places of the first Christians. The word is Greek and originally denoted a receptacle hollowed out of a hill, in other words a sand or tufa pit, into which the corpses of slaves and criminals were thrown after they had been worked to death. But even in very early times the bodies of martyrs were put into these often quite inaccessible cavities (then called crypts) to prevent their venerated remains from falling into the hands of the pagans. And since it was the wish of many Christians to be buried near a martyr because they hoped that the body of a saint would give some protection to their own bodies, these places were gradually extended to form entire underground graveyards, or *coemeteria*. On the anniversaries of the martyrs' deaths, the congregation would assemble there to hear mass and receive communion. In times of persecution, Christians would take refuge in the *coemeteria*, although they were, all too often, pursued even under the earth, and many of them met death in the realm of the dead.

The structure of the Roman catacombs is in itself very simple. It consists of narrow passages, the lateral walls of which are lined with several tiers of hollow niches, one above another, designed to receive the bodies. Tablets of marble or terracotta, bearing inscriptions, close up the niches. But with more and more dead to be interred, more and more passages had to be excavated, and thus there came into being those many-storied, labyrinthine structures that even in ancient times made it increasingly difficult for the brotherhoods responsible for the care of the necropolises, the so-called *Fossores* and *Innocentiores*, to find their way.

Then came the end of the persecutions and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion. The underground worship

was transferred to the churches above ground, and the new custom was introduced of burying the dead in and around these churches. From the time of Pope Paul I, the remains of most of the martyrs were removed to the Pantheon or other worthy places in the city itself. As the catacombs themselves lost their importance, the knowledge of their construction was soon forgotten. During the Middle Ages, only the Catacombs of St Calixtus were visited by the faithful, and it was not until the beginning of modern times that people became again interested in the other burrows of the first Christians. Until late in the nineteenth century, large sections of the catacombs were no longer visited. Even today, in fact, there are some that have never been explored.

Nevertheless, many capable scholars have attempted to map out sizable sections of that sinister and dangerous underworld of Rome, which is plunged in eternal darkness. Largely because of the many-storied construction and because of the caving-in of so many parts, those scholars found themselves confronted with considerable difficulties. In some instances, though not in all, they have coped with the problem very ingeniously, and now the question was raised as to whether the vanished foreigner might have carried one of these maps with him, that of Savinio, perhaps, or of Boccalini. For if he had such a map, it might yet serve to lead him to safety. But the custodian of Sant'Urbano was unable to give any information on that point.

The possibility that the foreigner might have left the catacombs at a place other than that at which he had entered was also explored. The regular entrance to the Praetextatus catacombs was not in Sant'Urbano, but at some distance from the church, in a sand pit, one of the so-called *arenariae*, dating from antiquity. But it was considered quite improbable that Jessiersky had found his way back to the light of day there or elsewhere. For had he done so, although he might not have felt obliged to inform the custodian, he would have returned to his hotel where he had left

all his belongings and where his room was urgently needed for the accommodation of a high official who had arrived with his entire staff. Jessiersky, however, had not reappeared at the hotel.

Finally, there was the possibility that he might have taken along sufficient food to enable him to exist for a time under the earth. But the supply could not have been a very large one under any circumstances. Furthermore, the police had by now discovered that on the seventh he had reserved a passage on the *Aosta*, which had sailed from Naples for Buenos Aires on the ninth. The ship had left without him, and the cabin reserved for him had not been occupied.

So there was no alternative but to give him up for lost, to assume that yet another dead man had been added to the ranks of the ancient dead, and to call a halt to the investigations which had continued almost up to Ascension Day. As a precaution, however, though a somewhat belated one, the entrance under the altar of the lower church of Sant'Urbano, through which three persons had already vanished, was walled up.

In the course of the investigation, certain inquiries had brought out the fact that the last of these persons had been connected with some other incidents which had attracted notice in his own country, and in which its police were still interested.

The Austrian Ministry of the Interior, therefore, requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through its diplomatic representatives in Rome, to urge the Italian authorities to look once again into the particulars of Jessiersky's disappearance. In addition, the Vienna authorities proceeded to do some research of their own into the history of the vanished man. Concerning this, as well as the events in Italy, Dr Julius Gambs, of the Ministry of the Interior, drew up a comprehensive report. It is upon this report and upon various facts we ourselves have uncovered that we have based the following account of the extraordinary happenings that led to Jessiersky's disappearance.

**Copyrighted Material**

Around 1806, Pavel, the son of a certain Alexander Jezierskij, a native of Little Russia, settled in East Galicia in order to assume possession of the estates of his wife, the widow Raczynska, née Szoldrska. An impecunious army officer, he had met the Raczynski family during the campaign of 1805 when his contingent was stationed for a considerable time in Volhynia. Having made the acquaintance of the widow Raczynska, Pavel Alexandrovich Jezierskij allowed the troops to continue on their way west without him and thus failed to witness the meeting of the Russian and Austrian armies and the famous sunburst of Austerlitz on December 2 of that year. Instead, he asked to be retired from active service, began to court, and soon married, the widow. He then established himself solidly in Wiazownika and Marianowka, the two estates that had been her dowry in her first marriage, and shortly thereafter was accepted into the Polish nobility and given the Ciolek coat of arms. But as this acceptance had taken place at a time when the Grand Duchy of Warsaw was under French protection, the Austrian Empire, when it regained possession of Galicia, stubbornly refused to take notice of the Jezierskij nobility.

When Pavel Jezierskij's wife died – and she died very soon – he immediately remarried, this time one of his old sweethearts from Russia, the daughter of a man by the name of Bielski, the Starost of Utaikow, who claimed to be a prince. With this second

bride, an extravagant lady, he squandered the dowry of his first, more frugal wife. Of Marianowka and Wiazownika, Olgerd, his son by the widow Raczynska, was never to see so much as a blade of grass. Pavel Jezierskij himself had no choice but to give up his life as the proprietor of an estate and become a lawyer in Lemberg. But in that profession, he had little success. He plunged further and further into debt, and after a last attempt to squeeze some money out of Slobodka, an estate in the Stryi District that he still owned though it was leased, he died a ruined man. Because of this, one of his sons, Witold, born in 1837, was compelled to stoop to paid espionage, in the interests of the country of his fathers and to the detriment of his own. His activities were exposed, but not entirely. For Witold had been careful not to commit his misdemeanors alone and managed to implicate several of his colleagues in the gubernatorial government. As a result, his highest superiors, Vice-President von Kalchberg and Councillor von Mosch, instead of creating a scandal which would have brought disgrace not only upon half of the government of Galicia, but also upon themselves, hushed up the affair and simply ordered the immediate removal of those of their subordinates who had been directly involved.

So Witold Jezierskij went to Trieste where he tried in a different way to rise again in the world. First he asked to be allowed to spell his name 'Jessiersky,' because it looked less Russian. And his request, regarded as only right and reasonable in the light of past events, was granted. He then applied for permission to assume the name of his mother and to call himself 'Jessiersky-Bielsky,' which, to be sure, sounded quite Russian. Since, however, it might also be Czech and since that second request was considered a matter of minor consequence anyway, the authorities acceded to it. But when, obviously in pursuance of a long-deliberated plan, he also petitioned for the official recognition of the Polish knighthood, he received a curt refusal. With

this failure, all further projects he might have entertained, such as getting himself elevated to the rank of a Prince Bielsky, went up in smoke.

In dejection, he married Sophie von Grabaricz, the quite penniless daughter of a naval officer. He had two children by her, a son, whom he put into military school, and a daughter. This poor creature, because he was persuaded that no one would marry her and because she could speak a few words of Polish, he prevailed upon to enter the Convent of the Barefoot Carmelites in Cracow.

The son, Adam Jessiersky, served first in the infantry and later on the general staff. In 1908, by then a captain, he married a Fräulein Fries.

Gabriele Fries came of a very wealthy family. Her father owned a big transport business, the former Strattmann Palace in Vienna at 8 Bankgasse, and the Zinkeneck estate in the Alps. He had two sons, and when the war broke out in 1914, he did everything in his power to prevent them from being slaughtered on the altar of the fatherland. His son-in-law, however, who meanwhile had been promoted to the rank of major, was no less active in his endeavors to bring about the precise opposite. As a result of his military connections, he was successful. Working officially for, unofficially against, the family, he managed not only to get the two young men drafted but also to have them sent to the front. What is more, he had all the good fortune he had been hoping for. Both sons fell in battle and the entire Fries fortune was designated to go to his wife.

He himself, of course, did not fall. He reached a colonel's rank and lived until 1925, when he died of cancer.

He left one son, named Alexander after the first Jezierskij about whom anything was known, but also in memory of all the other ancestors whose existence could only be surmised, the felt-clad Russian horsemen.