

Purification

By Robert Barr

Eugène Caspilier sat at one of the metal tables of the Café Égalité, allowing the water from the carafe to filter slowly through a lump of sugar and a perforated spoon into his glass of absinthe. It was not an expression of discontent that was to be seen on the face of Caspilier, but rather a fleeting shade of unhappiness which showed he was a man to whom the world was being unkind. On the opposite side of the little round table sat his friend and sympathizing companion, Henri Lacour. He sipped his absinthe slowly, as absinthe should be sipped, and it was evident that he was deeply concerned with the problem that confronted his comrade.

‘Why, in Heaven’s name, did you marry her? That, surely, was not necessary.’

Eugène shrugged his shoulders. The shrug said plainly, ‘Why, indeed? Ask me an easier one.’

For some moments there was silence between the two. Henri did not seem to expect any other reply than the expressive shrug, and each man consumed his beverage dreamily.

‘A man must live,’ said Caspilier at last; ‘and the profession of decadent poet is not a lucrative one. Of course there is undying fame in the future, but then we must have our absinthe in the present. Why did I marry her, you ask? I was the victim of my environment. I must write poetry; to write poetry, I must live; to live, I must have money; to get money, I was forced to marry. Valdorème is one of the best pastry-cooks in Paris; is it my fault, then, that the Parisians have a greater love for pastry than for poetry? Am I to blame that her wares are more sought for at her shop than are mine at the booksellers’? I would willingly have shared the income of the shop with her without the folly of marriage, but Valdorème has strange, barbaric notions which were not overturnable by civilized reason. Still my action was not wholly mercenary, nor indeed mainly so. There was a rhythm about her name that pleased me. Then she is a Russian, and my country and hers were at that moment in each other’s arms, so I proposed to Valdorème that we follow the national example. But, alas! Henri, my friend, I find that even ten years’ residence in Paris will not eliminate the savage from the nature of a Russian. In spite of the name that sounds like the soft flow of a rich mellow wine, my wife is little better than a barbarian. When I told her about Denise, she acted like a mad woman—drove me into the streets.’

‘But why did you tell her about Denise?’

‘*Pour quoi?* How I hate that word! Why! Why!! Why!!! It dogs one’s actions like a bloodhound, eternally yelping for a reason. It seems to me that all my life I have had to account to an inquiring why. I don’t know why I told her; it did not appear to be a matter requiring any thought or consideration. I spoke merely because Denise came into my mind at the moment. But after that, the deluge; I shudder when I think of it.’

‘Again the why?’ said the poet’s friend. ‘Why not cease to think of conciliating your wife? Russians are unreasoning aborigines. Why not take up life in a simple poetic way with Denise, and avoid the Rue de Russie altogether?’

Caspilier sighed gently. Here fate struck him hard. ‘Alas! my friend, it is impossible. Denise is an artist’s model, and those brutes of painters who get such prices for their daubs, pay her so little each week that her wages would hardly keep me in food and drink. My paper, pens, and ink I can get at the cafés, but how am I to clothe myself? If Valdorème would but make us a small allowance, we could be so happy. Valdorème is madame, as I have so often told her, and she owes me something for that; but she actually thinks that because a man is married he should

come dutifully home like a bourgeois grocer. She has no poetry, no sense of the needs of a literary man, in her nature.'

Lacour sorrowfully admitted that the situation had its embarrassments. The first glass of absinthe did not show clearly how they were to be met, but the second brought bravery with it, and he nobly offered to beard the Russian lioness in her den, explain the view Paris took of her unjustifiable conduct, and, if possible, bring her to reason.

Caspilier's emotion overcame him, and he wept silently, while his friend, in eloquent language, told how famous authors, whose names were France's proudest possession, had been forgiven by their wives for slight lapses from strict domesticity, and these instances, he said, he would recount to Madame Valdorême, and so induce her to follow such illustrious examples.

The two comrades embraced and separated; the friend to use his influence and powers of persuasion with Valdorême; the husband to tell Denise how blessed they were in having such a friend to intercede for them; for Denise, bright little Parisienne that she was, bore no malice against the unreasonable wife of her lover.

Henri Lacour paused opposite the pastry-shop on the Rue de Russie that bore the name of 'Valdorême' over the temptingly filled windows. Madame Caspilier had not changed the title of her well-known shop when she gave up her own name. Lacour caught sight of her serving her customers, and he thought she looked more like a Russian princess than a shopkeeper. He wondered now at the preference of his friend for the petite black-haired model. Valdorême did not seem more than twenty; she was large, and strikingly handsome, with abundant auburn hair that was almost red. Her beautifully moulded chin denoted perhaps too much firmness, and was in striking contrast to the weakness of her husband's lower face. Lacour almost trembled as she seemed to flash one look directly at him, and, for a moment, he feared she had seen him loitering before the window. Her eyes were large, of a limpid amber colour, but deep within them smouldered a fire that Lacour felt he would not care to see blaze up. His task now wore a different aspect from what it had worn in front of the Café Égalité. Hesitating a moment, he passed the shop, and, stopping at a neighbouring café, ordered another glass of absinthe.

Fortified once again, he resolved to act before his courage had time to evaporate, and so, goading himself on with the thought that no man should be afraid to meet any woman, be she Russian or civilized, he entered the shop, making his most polite bow to Madame Caspilier.

'I have come, madame,' he began, 'as the friend of your husband, to talk with you regarding his affairs.'

'Ah!' said Valdorême; and Henri saw with dismay the fires deep down in her eyes rekindle. But she merely gave some instructions to an assistant, and, turning to Lacour, asked him to be so good as to follow her.

She led him through the shop and up a stair at the back, throwing open a door on the first floor. Lacour entered a neat drawing-room, with windows opening out upon the street. Madame Caspilier seated herself at a table, resting her elbow upon it, shading her eyes with her hand, and yet Lacour felt them searching his very soul.

'Sit down,' she said. 'You are my husband's friend. What have you to say?'

Now, it is a difficult thing for a man to tell a beautiful woman that her husband—for the moment—prefers some one else, so Lacour began on generalities. He said a poet might be likened to a butterfly, or perhaps to the more industrious bee, who sipped honey from every flower, and so enriched the world. A poet was a law unto himself, and should not be judged harshly from what might be termed a shopkeeping point of view. Then Lacour, warming to his

work, gave many instances where the wives of great men had condoned and even encouraged their husbands' little idiosyncrasies, to the great augmenting of our most valued literature.

Now and then, as this eloquent man talked, Valdorême's eyes seemed to flame dangerously in the shadow, but the woman neither moved nor interrupted him while he spoke. When he had finished, her voice sounded cold and unimpassioned, and he felt with relief that the outbreak he had feared was at least postponed.

'You would advise me then,' she began, 'to do as the wife of that great novelist did, and invite my husband and the woman he admires to my table?'

'Oh, I don't say I could ask you to go so far as that.'

'I'm no half-way woman. It is all or nothing with me. If Lacour; 'but—'

I invited my husband to dine with me, I would also invite this creature— What is her name? Denise, you say. Well, I would invite her too. Does she know he is a married man?'

'Yes,' cried Lacour eagerly; 'but I assure you, madame, she has nothing but the kindest feelings towards you. There is no jealousy about Denise.'

'How good of her! How very good of her!' said the Russian Woman, with such bitterness that Lacour fancied uneasily that he had somehow made an injudicious remark, whereas all his efforts were concentrated in a desire to conciliate and please.

'Very well,' said Valdorême, rising. 'You may tell my husband that you have been successful in your mission. Tell him that I will provide for them both. Ask them to honour me with their presence at breakfast tomorrow morning at twelve o'clock. If he wants money, as you say, here are two hundred francs, which will perhaps be sufficient for his wants until midday tomorrow.'

Lacour thanked her with a profuse graciousness that would have delighted any ordinary giver, but Valdorême stood impassive like a tragedy queen, and seemed only anxious that he should speedily take his departure, now that his errand was done.

The heart of the poet was filled with joy when he heard from his friend that at last Valdorême had come to regard his union with Denise in the light of reason. Caspilier, as he embraced Lacour, admitted that perhaps there was something to be said for his wife after all.

The poet dressed himself with more than usual care on the day of the feast, and Denise, who accompanied him, put on some of the finery that had been bought with Valdorême's donation. She confessed that she thought Eugène's wife had acted with consideration towards them, but maintained that she did not wish to meet her, for, judging from Caspilier's account, his wife must be a somewhat formidable and terrifying person; still she went with him, she said, solely through good nature, and a desire to heal family differences. Denise would do anything in the cause of domestic peace.

The shop assistant told the pair, when they had dismissed the cab, that madame was waiting for them upstairs. In the drawing-room Valdorême was standing with her back to the window like a low-browed goddess, her tawny hair loose over her shoulders, and the pallor of her face made more conspicuous by her costume of unrelieved black. Caspilier, with the grace characteristic of him, swept off his hat, and made a low, deferential bow; but when he straightened himself up, and began to say the complimentary things and poetical phrases he had put together for the occasion at the café the night before, the lurid look of the Russian made his tongue falter; and Denise, who had never seen a woman of this sort before, laughed a nervous, half-frightened little laugh, and clung closer to her lover than before. The wife was even more forbidding than she had imagined. Valdorême shuddered slightly when she saw this intimate movement on the part of her rival, and her hand clenched and unclenched convulsively.

'Come,' she said, cutting short her husband's halting harangue, and sweeping past them, drawing her skirts aside on nearing Denise, she led the way up to the dining-room a floor higher.

'I'm afraid of her,' whimpered Denise, holding back. 'She will poison us.'

'Nonsense,' said Caspilier, in a whisper. 'Come along. She is too fond of me to attempt anything of that kind, and you are safe when I am here.'

Valdorême sat at the head of the table, with her husband at her right hand and Denise on her left. The breakfast was the best either of them had ever tasted. The hostess sat silent, but no second talker was needed when the poet was present. Denise laughed merrily now and then at his bright sayings, for the excellence of the meal had banished her fears of poison.

'What penetrating smell is this that fills the room? Better open the window,' said Caspilier.

'It is nothing,' replied Valdorême, speaking for the first time since they had sat down. 'It is only naphtha. I have had this room cleaned with it. The window won't open, and if it would, we could not hear you talk with the noise from the street.'

The poet would suffer anything rather than have his eloquence interfered with, so he said no more about the fumes of naphtha. When the coffee was brought in, Valdorême dismissed the trim little maid who had waited on them.

'I have some of your favourite cigarettes here. I will get them.'

She arose, and, as she went to the table on which the boxes lay, she quietly and deftly locked the door, and, pulling out the key, slipped it into her pocket.

'Do you smoke, mademoiselle?' she asked, speaking to Denise. She had not recognized her presence before.

'Sometimes, madame,' answered the girl, with a titter.

'You will find these cigarettes excellent. My husband's taste in cigarettes is better than in many things. He prefers the Russian to the French.'

Caspilier laughed loudly.

'That's a slap at you, Denise,' he said.

'At me? Not so; she speaks of cigarettes, and I myself prefer the Russian, only they are so expensive.'

A look of strange eagerness came into Valdorême's expressive face, softened by a touch of supplication. Her eyes were on her husband, but she said rapidly to the girl—

'Stop a moment, mademoiselle. Do not light your cigarette until I give the word.'

Then to her husband she spoke beseechingly in Russian, a language she had taught him in the early months of their marriage.

'Yevgenii, Yevgenii! Don't you see the girl's a fool? How can you care for her? She would be as happy with the first man she met in the street. I—I think only of you. Come back to me, Yevgenii!'

She leaned over the table towards him, and in her vehemence clasped his wrist. The girl watched them both with a smile. It reminded her of a scene in an opera she had heard once in a strange language. The prima donna had looked and pleaded like Valdorême.

Caspilier shrugged his shoulders, but did not withdraw his wrist from her firm grasp.

'Why go over the whole weary ground again?' he said. 'If it were not Denise, it would be somebody else. I was never meant for a constant husband, Val. I understood from Lacour that we were to have no more of this nonsense.'

She slowly relaxed her hold on his unresisting wrist. The old, hard, tragic look came into her face as she drew a deep breath. The fire in the depths of her amber eyes rekindled, as the softness went out of them.

‘You may light your cigarette now, mademoiselle,’ she said almost in a whisper to Denise.

‘I swear I could light mine in your eyes, Val,’ cried her husband. ‘You would make a name for yourself on the stage. I will write a tragedy for you, and we will—’

Denise struck the match. A simultaneous flash of lightning and clap of thunder filled the room. The glass in the window fell clattering into the street. Valdorême was standing with her back against the door. Denise, fluttering her helpless little hands before her, tottered shrieking to the broken window. Caspilier, staggering panting to his feet, gasped—

‘You Russian devil! The key, the key!’

He tried to clutch her throat, but she pushed him back. ‘Go to your Frenchwoman. She’s calling for help.’ Denise sank by the window, one burning arm over the sill, and was silent. Caspilier, mechanically beating back the fire from his shaking head, whimpering and sobbing, fell against the table, and then went headlong on the floor.

Valdorême, a pillar of fire, swaying gently to and fro before the door, whispered in a voice of agony—

‘Oh, Eugène, Eugène!’ and flung herself like a flaming angel—or fiend—on the prostrate form of the man.