

THE EUPANTOPHONE

I

On 31 December last, *L'Écho Plaintif*, a newspaper of social demands and political revenges, published in its famous Thursday personal advertisement section the following item:

Blind man aged thirty-five, having lost his sight in a laboratory accident and enjoying an annual income of fifty thousand francs, revertible to his widow, desires marriage with a young woman blind from birth. Address communications to M. Victor Blancadet, 14A, Rue du Sabre-de-l'Abbé, Paris.

Among women whose orbits were radiant with ocular globes in a perfect state, the majority pitied the fate of the unfortunate victim of the laboratory accident, and some, immediately tempted by the annual income of fifty thousand francs revertible to the widow, and also by the liberty that was bound to be enjoyed by the companion of a man whose eyes had been materially closed by an accident, wrote to the indicated address.

Each one boasted of the physique and the qualities that fate had devolved upon her; each of them possessed the grace of Venus and the virtue of Penelope, and dreamed of becoming the conjugal Antigone of the modern Oedipus struck by the terrible sphinx of science.

One of them, borrowing a pen from her lover, a journalist known for the incomparable voluptuousness of his style, celebrated her own charms with expressions capable of warming the most reserved manes of the Sages of Greece; but, to the shame of the Muse dear to adolescents still only nourished on dreams, and old men still trying to whinny at the evocations of the combat of amour, the letter, overflowing with such alluring promises, received a reply that did not fail to surprise its author.

In her large double bed—her drill-field, as she called it—the blonde Virginie Lauria was asleep, with one arm passed under the head of her lover, Alcée Baillargal, the vigilant reporter whom she had stolen from a socialite in the wake of a resounding scandal, and whom she could no longer live without.

Virginie and Alcée loved one another passionately, with a love that, for all that it was one of the most illegitimate, was nonetheless one of the most sincere.

Although entirely theoretical, Virginie's fidelity was considered as perfectly sufficient by the jealousy of the journalist, who was too well versed in modern life to pretend to an exclusive monopoly on the favors of a woman whose material needs had always been completely foreign to him. Would not any attempt to subsidize them be a prostitution of his pen and his talent? It was also evidently equitable, just, and infinitely more natural, that his mistress, utilizing the gifts with which nature had endowed her, should not refuse the presents that a host of admirers took pleasure in laying at her feet. A more austere morality and principles would certainly have displeased the blonde Virginie, who, thanks to that fortunate state of affairs, had lost none of the relative luxury of her existence as a kept woman, and also enjoyed the heart of "the handsome Alcée," as her friends were pleased to call her lover.

The handsome Alcée was in a sticky situation. Several articles had earned him some rather severe criticism on the part of the editor of the *Écho Plaintif*, and he sensed that his star was declining by the day. Had not a colleague, redoubtable for the ever-exact cruelty of his words, nicknamed him the "shooting star"? His faith in himself was almost shattered, and he was not slow to blame Virginie for his failures as a writer.

“You’re my Delilah,” he said to her, in a reproachful tone. “Like Samson, I can feel the chill of your scissors in my hair.”

Virginie, to whom the significance of the symbols of sacred history was less important than her passion, replied: “My darling Samson, I love your long curly locks too much to have any desire to cut them!”

“Before knowing you, I worked hard, I wrote fluently. Now...”

“You’re going to talk to me about your socialite again, aren’t you?” She added, in a jealous tone: “But don’t you see that she was the one who was using you?”

The dialogue continued on that theme until the chronicler, stimulated by such assaults—in which he rarely had the last word—found the subject of an article. He sat down at the small drawing-room table.

Virginie, conscious of being a hindrance to her lover’s painful parturition, kept quiet until Alcée, after having blackened five or six sheets of foolscap, got up, rubbing his hands, and exclaimed: “Oh, this time, if the Chilly Ape”—a nickname that the editor of the *Écho Plaintif* had earned by virtue of a bizarre tic that made him ask all his interlocutors, in summer as in winter, whether it was cold out—“isn’t content, he’s very difficult to please!”

To recompense himself for the task accomplished, he went to Virginie, kissed her neck and begged her pardon for the hurtful things he had said.

Peace was quickly made, and, as usual, Charlotte, the young maidservant, summoned to put the scarcely-dry copy in the post, found her mistress on “Monsieur’s” knees. That spectacle had the gift of provoking nervous laughter in the pretty soubrette, which she could not suppress, and which earned her furious reprimands on Virginie’s part.

“Well, Charlotte, when will you have stopped laughing like the little imbecile you are? Are you making fun of me, by chance?”

Between two fits of crazy laughter, Charlotte tried to exonerate herself. “Oh no Madame! But when I see Madame like that...”

“There’s nothing for you to see here! I forbid you to look! What I do is none of your business!”

“I know that, Madame, but when I see Madame like that, happy, I’m so glad!”

“Come on! Hurry up and take this letter to the post—it’s very urgent!” Virginie ordered, feeling disarmed by the candid sympathy of the young maid, whose sonorous laughter faded away in the antechamber.

“How old is Charlotte?” Alcée asked.

“Sixteen, I think. Why?”

“No reason. Hey—a nice title for a novel: *Charlotte, or the Schoolgirl of Love*. Do you think she’s still virtuous?”

“What concern is that of yours? Her virtue is her own business. She either has deposited it or will deposit it at the feet of some handsome Republican Guard, who’ll take possession of it without hesitation. Me, I lost mine in a painter’s studio in the Rue Denfert-Rochereau, and...”

“And, that painter having a policy of not giving back objects left in his studio, you never saw it again!”

“Never. I haven’t even looked for it.”

“You’ve done well. To live, it’s sometimes necessary to sacrifice one’s capital.”

“Oh, if I’d only known you in those days!”

“Thanks—but I’m very happy with the interest. Will any be collected today?”

“If you wish, my love!”

And the heavy door-curtain separating the drawing room from the bedroom fell back behind the two lovers.

Life was, however, becoming difficult. Alcée thought more and more about his socialite, whose solid situation had once ensured the journalist an existence exempt from worry. So Virginie, having chanced to read the advertisement in the *Écho Plaintif*, said to herself that becoming the wife of that blind gentleman, with an annual income of fifty thousand francs, would be an excellent operation from all points of view. She would enjoy a considerable income, and it would be easy for her, by passing Alcée off as her brother

or her cousin, to install her lover in the home of the blind man—who, naturally, would not be able to keep an eye on them.

After having ripened the project for a few days, she had talked about it to Baillargal, who replied, with a haughty dignity, that he did not have to get mixed up in her affairs and that she had a perfect right to act in her own best interests. She had then written a letter to Victor Blancadet, in which, in scarcely-disguised terms, she had caused the unfortunate man to glimpse paradisaical horizons.

Naturally, Charlotte had been taken into the confidence of her mistress, whose prudence had also judged it wise to warn the concierge, in case the blind man took it into his head to have enquiries made regarding his passionate correspondent. The instruction was to reply that Virginie Lauria, a young woman of excellent family, the orphan of a father—a senior officer in the French army—who had died a long time ago, lived with her mother, who was away for the moment in one of her properties in the Midi.

Everything had therefore been anticipated, and several times a day, in order to manifest her zeal, the concierge came up to tell her tenant that the postman had just gone by without leaving anything for her.

Finally, one morning, by the first post, a letter was found bearing the inscription: *Mademoiselle Virginie Lauria, c/o her mother, 12 Rue des Hautes-Herbes, Paris.*

The concierge easily deduced that the envelope in question must contain the response so impatiently awaited, because letters to 12 Rue des Hautes-Herbes were usually addressed simply to “Mademoiselle Virginie,” the surname Lauria only being employed by neophytes of Parisian life, and the addition of the maternal chaperone never reproduced, so far as the concierge could recall.

Without taking the time to lock the door of her lodge, the worthy concierge raced upstairs. Her violent agitation of the doorbell brought Charlotte running, still barefoot and in her underskirt, her hair virgin of any attempt at brushing, and the two women rushed into the room where Virginie was asleep, lying beside her lover.

“Madame! Madame! It’s the reply!” cried the two voices, while the young maid drew the curtains from the window.

Woken with a start, Virginie freed her arm—a movement that caused Alcée to utter a dull groan. She took possession of the letter, which she swiftly unsealed, and, at the bottom of the last page, her eyes, still full of sleep, read the signature *Victor Blancadet* traced in large letters.

Then, with no hesitation, she shook her companion, who had automatically turned over in order to continue sleeping. Increasingly sonorous groans preceded Baillargal’s awakening. Quite bewildered, he articulated with difficulty, in the midst of an enormous yawn: “What? What is it?”

“The response! It’s the response!”

“What response?” Alcée interrogated, negligently, his intelligence still obscured.

“*The response—Victor Blancadet’s response!*” yelled the blonde Virginie, irritably, propping herself up on her elbow and exposing the upper part of her body, devoid of the most transparent night attire, without worrying about it unduly.

“Ah! And what does it say?” Baillargal asked, in a tone that he strove to render distracted.

Virginie began reading, while Charlotte and the concierge, side by side, awaited the great news that they would incontinently communicate to the entire house and much of the neighborhood.

“*Mademoiselle,*

“The terms of your letter have touched me infinitely, and certain passages went straight to my heart. The delicacy of the sentiments that you express do the greatest honor to the sex to which you belong, and the grace with which nature has delighted in embellishing your person yields nothing to the precious moral qualities that fate has accorded you in surplus, to make you, it seems, a rare creature, an exceptional individual...”

“He’s going for it!” Alcée exclaimed, now sitting up beside his companion. “And what style!”

“Shut up, then—let me continue. *I have read and reread your letter...*”

“Not bad for a blind man!”

“Shut up! *I have weighed all its terms and I believe that I have penetrated your thought completely. Your ardent desire to consecrate your days to the poor invalid that I am, to be the light in his darkness, the eyes through which he will see, has made me weep tenderly—for I weep, alas, as other men do! Well,*

having reflected at length. I can only thank you for your spirit of sacrifice; your beauty is not made to be contemplated solely by blind eyes; perhaps I would see you poorly and you would, if you will pardon the expression, be like flowers that one places before animals that are unable to appreciate them..."

"Oh, the imbecile!" Baillargal burst out, the irony of the last lines causing him to foresee eventual disaster.

Imperturbably, however, Virginie continued: "*So, I shall not be able to follow you into the heaven whose delights you paint for me; I shall continue to live with my cherished works of science and literature until the day when God permits me to unite my destiny with a blind woman, whose misery it will be given to me to soothe.*"

"Please accept, Mademoiselle, the homage of my respectful sympathy. Victor Blancadet.

"That's a slap in the face, all the same," poor Virginia declared, in a disappointed tone.

"For sure," cried the maid and the concierge, in chorus—an exclamation that earned them a swift rebuke.

"What are you two doing here? I don't need you! Leave me alone and get out—you to your kitchen and you to your lodge, or the devil!"

The two women withdrew, their curiosity satisfied, while a suggestive dialogue commenced between Virginie and Alcée, the former occupied in turning Blancadet's letter over and over between her fingers as if, by examining it more closely, she retained the hope of discovering something other than it contained. In the meantime, Alcée scratched his torso energetically through the gap in his shirt.

"Always the same! I have no luck. One can say that I have no luck at all!"

"What do you want? It's isn't my fault," Virginia excused herself, humbly.

"Perhaps it's mine? What did you tell the imbecile? Obviously, things that immediately made him see what you are."

"For a start, he can't see, because he's blind."

"Go on! What did you write to him?"

"I told him that I'd be happy to become his wife...that his misfortune was one of those that only a woman's hands can soothe...that to love, there was no need to see...that he only had to place his ear on my breast to hear a heart that would only beat for him..."

"Oh, that's nice! And you wanted him to take you for something other than you are?"

"Oh, what I am...what I am! I know full well that I'm not as honest as your socialite...but one does what one can. For a start, I'm not deceiving anyone."

"Naturally."

"Of course, naturally! Do you think that if I didn't love you, I wouldn't have gone to Russia with that prince who wanted to take me away to marry me?"

To marry you? Oh la la! If he knew about me, your prince, he'd light a big candle to me for having kept you! Anyway, all things considered, I'm wondering why I'm arguing with you. You're perfectly free to do as you wish. You wanted to attempt a marriage. That was your right. I don't see why I should get mixed up in things that don't concern me!"

"So, my love, you don't hold it against me?"

"Me? Not at all!"

"That's nice. Let me kiss you. So, if I wrote to him again...?"

"To whom? To that imbecile? To expose yourself again to his secretary's lack of gallantry and facile irony? Not on your life! Hang on, though...I've got an idea. I'll go see this cripple, whose eccentricity isn't devoid of a certain cachet—there's material there for a superb article. With the letter he's addressed to you, I already have a respectable number of lines, which I can frame with a description of his apartment and his entourage—things and people that are, I suppose, in harmony with his character."

About midday, Alcée decided to get up. When Virginie reminded him about the projected visit, he said: "It isn't worth the bother of dressing up for a blind man. A casual jacket will be perfectly sufficient."

After a sober lunch, as is appropriate for people who get up late and are saving themselves for dinner, Alcée Baillargal kissed Virginie, went down three flights of stairs, hurried past the concierge's lodge to avoid being interrupted, and went into the street in search of a cab.

II

On the stroke of three, Alcée Baillargal crossed the threshold of the house bearing the number 140A in the Rue du Sabre-de-l'Abbé and asked the concierge for directions to Monsieur Victor Blancadet's apartment.

"Facing block. Ring loudly if you want Monsieur Célestin to come and open up!"

That remark, made in a very engaging tone, suggested clearly that the worthy concierge was disposed to chat a little. Baillargal did not want to let an opportunity escape to procure some information that was bound to be useful in presenting himself to Blancadet.

"Oh yes," he said, with his most gracious smile. "He's a trifle deaf, Monsieur Célestin!"

Slightly surprised at first, the concierge, concluding that her interlocutor was perfectly naïve, laughed as she replied: "Deaf, Monsieur Célestin? But he's no more deaf than you or me—he doesn't want to hear, that's all!"

"Oh, you think so?" said Baillargal, mechanically, primarily concerned not to let the conversation drop.

"Certainly!" As if seized by a sudden suspicion, she added: "You don't know him, then?"

"I confess to you that this is the first time I've come here," Baillargal replied, humbly.

"Oh, then it's not surprising! You don't know Monsieur Blancadet either?" the concierge asked, curious to know who the new visitor was.

"No, Madame, I don't know Monsieur Blancadet—so you could render me a great service by giving me a little information. I'm a journalist."

"Ah! Monsieur is a journalist? If you'd care to do me the honor of coming into my lodge for a moment, we could chat more easily. I like journalists. They often came, once, to see Monsieur Lézardot—you know, it's his son, Napoléon Lézardot who was eaten by the natives in Africa six years ago. Since that misfortune, Monsieur Lézardot did nothing but weep, and the grief ended up killing him. He was a very decent man, all the same. Look—he lived up there on the third floor; you can see his windows if you lean out a little."

In order to put a stop to that flow of useless words, Baillargal declared that he remembered Napoléon Lézardot perfectly; he addressed a sigh of dolorous sympathy to the manes of Monsieur Lézardot and abruptly reverted to the subject that interested him.

"So, Monsieur Blancadet is blind?"

"Yes, Monsieur—but between us, I think he can see regardless."

"What! Come on—if he's blind, he can't see; and if he can see, he's not blind."

"That was my reasoning, and that of all the people who don't know Monsieur Blancadet. What I'm sure of it is Monsieur Blancadet no longer has any eyes, but I've often had proof that he can still see, since his terrible accident."

"Ah! Monsieur Blancadet was the victim of an accident?"

"What? You don't remember the catastrophe at the Sorbonne? Wait...yes, it was ten years ago...exactly! It was eight years after the death of poor Benoît..."

"Who's Benoît?"

"My man, of course! Of, Monsieur, he was a hard worker. That one could say...in the quarter too. He left me a widow in 1877. So it was in 1885...you don't remember?"

"No, not at all. In that era I was doing my military service in Corsica."

"In the zouaves?"

"No, why?"

"Oh, no reason. Benoît did his service in the zouaves, in Algeria, and he told me extraordinary stories. He told me, for instance, that in Algeria, there are no concierges! It was to make me angry, you understand, that the poor dear man told me that. Can you imagine, a house in a city without a concierge? In the country, I don't mind, but in a city..."

"Obviously."

"It's astonishing, all the same, that you haven't heard talk of that accident. It made enough noise, though. The entire Sorbonne quarter had blown up!"

"Indeed."

"Oh, you've got it now? It was terrible. You could hear the explosion all the way to Orléans. Me, I was in my cellar, and at first I thought it was a truck that had crashed in the street. I ran upstairs—I was still nimble in those days. In the street I saw men, women and children running away as if the police were after them. Oh, my poor Monsieur...Monsieur?"

"Baillargal."

"It's difficult to say, that name. You're not French, for sure?"

"Yes—I'm from the Midi."

"Oh! Then it's possible, after all...what newspaper do you write for?"

"Several...mostly the *Écho Plaignif*."

"Hey, that's nice! I read it every day. I'll wager that you write the latest news?"

"Oh—no, actually."

"What do you do, then?"

"Articles...current affairs...the society column."

"Oh—it's you who's always talking about a heap of people that nobody knows? I don't understand why you, who seem intelligent, aren't writing the latest news! Perhaps it's difficult to do, but that's what's interesting."

"From now on, I'll try to do it, Madame."

"I'll read it with pleasure. But let's get back to the accident. Where was I? Oh yes...people shouting in the street—and, a few minutes later, they brought back that poor Monsieur Blancadet on a stretcher. They thought he was so completely dead that they'd covered him with a sheet that was already stained with blood. I'm so sensitive that I faint when I only see an animal suffering..."

"You fainted?"

"Me, Monsieur? What about my duty? I accompanied the porters to the apartment. Oh, if you'd seen the picture when they took off the sheet! Oh, my poor Monsieur...Monsieur?"

"Baillargal...Alcée Baillargal."

"Ah, Monsieur Alcée...if you'd seen poor Monsieur Blancadet! A veritable living dish-cloth."

"A dish-cloth?"

"That's not how you say it? What do you say?"

"A wreck?"

"Ah! Yes, a wreck...and for sure, he was one! Of, merciful Father in Heaven! One eye hanging down on his cheek...and blood everywhere! It was terrible!"

"And Monsieur Blancadet?"

"Well, Monsieur Alcée, can you believe that he was still breathing? Oh, not much, poor fellow. He hovered between life and death for three months, much closer to death than life. He was well cared for, though! I watched over him for several hours every day. And his mistress, a genteel little woman, spent days by his bedside. She was so tired, poor child, that she fell ill and died before Monsieur Blancadet was in a fit state to accompany her to the cemetery. Oh, merciful Father in Heaven! It's terrible, things like that! And if you'd seen poor Monsieur Blancadet cry with the one eye he still had...!"

"Ah! He still had one eye?"

"Yes, Monsieur Alcée; the other had been ripped out in the explosion by a shard of glass, because, I forgot to tell you, Monsieur Blancadet was working at the Sorbonne in Monsieur Lehargol's laboratory—he was a famous scientist too...but he was blown to pieces. They didn't find anything but his watch, on the top deck of an omnibus that was going through the Place Saint-Michel. In the laboratory they were heating up a heap of stuff in big glass flasks. And when everything exploded, can you imagine the mess?"

"Yes I can. So, Monsieur Blancadet is a cyclops?"

"What do you mean?"

"That he only has one eye."

“Then Monsieur Blancadet isn’t a cyclops.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t have any eyes! And even that’s very curious: three months after his accident, the doctors tried to make him understand that it was necessary to take great precautions to save the eye that had only been slightly injured, but Monsieur Blancadet said that he had no need of that eye and that it would be better to take it out straight away. The doctors thought that the poor fellow had gone mad and every morning and night they put him in a cold bath, in spite of his protestations and screams. But he stuck to his idea, and one day, when a pair of scissors had been left within his reach, he picked them up and punctured the left eye, which the physicians had almost succeeded in curing. He had to undergo another operation, which he did without the slightest emotion, and when the last bandages were taken off he put a pair of spectacles on his nose that he’d made himself, and in the most natural fashion in the world, he declared that he’d never been able to see so well.”

“Of course! He’d gone mad! And since then?”

“Since then? Well, it’s still the same. One would think that he could see like you or me.”

“Madame Benoît, you’re making fun of me!”

“Me? Not at all. Anyway, go make your visit, and afterwards, tell me whether or not Monsieur Blancadet is blind!”

“The facing block, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. Ring loudly because of Monsieur Célestin.”

“Until later, Madame Benoît!”

“Until later, Monsieur Alcée.”