

'Irène Némirovsky is the
literary discovery of the decade'
SUNDAY TIMES

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

Jezebel



VINTAGE ORIGINALS

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About the Book

In a French courtroom, the trial of a woman is taking place. Gladys Eysenach is no longer young, but she is still beautiful, elegant, cold. She is accused of shooting dead her much-younger lover. As the witnesses take the stand and the case unfolds, Gladys relives fragments of her past: her childhood, her absent father, her marriage, her turbulent relationship with her daughter, her decline, and then the final irrevocable act. With the depth of insight and pitiless compassion we have come to expect from the author of *Suite Française*, Irène Némirovsky shows us the soul of a desperate woman obsessed with her lost youth.

About the Author

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, the daughter of a successful Jewish banker. In 1918 her family fled the Russian Revolution for France where she became a bestselling novelist, author of *David Golder*, *Le Bal*, *The Courilof Affair*, *All Our Worldly Goods* and other works published in her lifetime or afterwards, such as *Suite Française* and *Fire in the Blood*.

Némirovsky was prevented from publishing when the Germans occupied France and moved with her husband and two small daughters from Paris to the safety of the small village of Issy-l'Evêque (in German occupied territory). She died in Auschwitz in 1942.

Sandra Smith is a fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge, and has translated ten of Irène Némirovsky's novels into English.

Also by Irène Némirovsky

Suite Française

David Golder

Le Bal (including Snow in Autumn)

The Courilof Affair

Fire in the Blood

All Our Worldly Goods

The Dogs and the Wolves

The Wine of Solitude

The Misunderstanding

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

Jezebel

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
Sandra Smith

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

A woman stands in the dock accused of murdering her young lover. A succession of witnesses are called to testify to her character. Gladys Eysenach listens in silence, admitting to the crime but refusing to explain why she has committed murder.

'Jezebel' ... the very name immediately conjures up a host of impressions, all negative: seductress, traitor, whore. Yet the Jezebel of the Old Testament was not originally condemned for her loose morals, but for convincing her husband, King Ahab, to reject the God of Israel in order to worship the Phoenician god, Baal. Némirovsky's Jezebel worships an idol as well: her own beauty. To her, beauty is power; it defines her life and her worth. As Gladys ages and her fears turn to obsessions, Némirovsky explores the fine balance between victim and criminal, and the reader is torn between sympathy and horror. *Jezebel* is a fascinating psychological study that has resonance in our modern culture's celebration of youth and beauty. Dissecting the mind of a woman obsessed with beauty and haunted by the fear of growing old, Némirovsky delivers a fascinating, tragic study of how such a woman sees herself and is seen by others.

In *Jezebel*, Gladys describes her own mother, whom she detested: 'Until she was eighteen years old, she had lived with her mother, a cold woman, harsh and virtually mad, an

elderly painted doll who was sometimes frivolous and sometimes terrifying ...' In *David Golder*, *Le Bal* and *The Wine of Solitude*, Némirovsky also depicts a certain type of mother in a fiercely negative light. This was almost certainly a reflection of her antagonistic relationship with her own mother, Fanny, who dressed her daughter in children's clothing when she was well into her teens, in order to give the impression that she herself was still youthful and seductive.

At the end of World War II, the bitter relationship between mothers and daughters that Némirovsky depicted many times in fiction was to be reflected in reality. Both Némirovsky and her husband, Michel Epstein, were murdered at Auschwitz. When the war was over, Fanny Némirovsky famously refused to open her door to her granddaughters, Denise, aged fifteen and Elisabeth, aged seven, telling their guardian to take them to an orphanage. Both children survived, thanks to the generosity of the publisher Albin Michel and other friends of Némirovsky.

When Fanny Némirovsky died, well into her nineties, only two things were found in the safe of her apartment: a copy of *David Golder* and a copy of *Jezebel*.

Sandra Smith
Robinson College
Cambridge

A woman stepped into the dock.

She was still beautiful, despite her paleness and her drained, distraught appearance. Her sensual eyelashes were pale from crying and her mouth drooped, yet she still looked young. Her hair was hidden beneath a black hat.

Out of habit she placed her hand on her neck, no doubt feeling for the long strand of pearls she had worn in the past, but her neck was bare; she faltered; slowly, sadly, she wrung her hands and a soft whisper ran round the breathless crowd of people as they followed her every move.

‘The gentlemen of the jury wish to see your face,’ said the Presiding Judge. ‘Remove your hat.’

She took it off and, once again, all eyes were drawn to her perfect, small, bare hands.

Her chambermaid was seated in the first row with the other witnesses. She moved instinctively as if to rise and help her mistress, then realised where she was; she blushed and looked confused.

It was a summer’s day in Paris, but dull and cold; rain streamed down the tall windows; a pallid orange glow lit up the old wooden panelling, the gilded coffered ceiling and the Judges’ red robes. The accused woman looked at the jurors sitting opposite her, then at the courtroom, where people formed clusters in every corner.

‘State your full name,’ said the Judge. ‘Place of birth ... Age ...’

It was impossible to hear what the defendant whispered.

‘She said something,’ murmured the women in the courtroom. ‘What was it? Where was she born? ... How old is she? ... We can’t hear a thing!’

Her hair was fine and light blonde; she was dressed in black. 'She's very good-looking,' one woman whispered, sighing with pleasure, as if she were at the theatre.

The members of the public in the standing area could not hear the reading of the charges very well. They passed the morning newspapers around to each other: every front page carried a photograph of the accused woman and an article about the crime.

The woman was called Gladys Eysenach. She had been accused of killing her lover, Bernard Martin, aged twenty.

The Judge began his interrogation: 'Where were you born?'

'Santa-Paloma.'

'That is a village between Brazil and Uruguay,' the Judge said to the jurors. 'What is your maiden name?'

'Gladys Burnera.'

'We shall not discuss your past here. I understand that your childhood and early adulthood were spent travelling in distant places, several of which have experienced political unrest and where it has been impossible to make the customary enquiries. We are therefore forced to rely, for the large part, on your own account of your early years. You have made an official statement claiming that you are the daughter of a shipowner from Montevideo, that your mother, Sophie Burnera, left your father two months after they were married, that you were born far from where he lived and that you never knew him. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'Your childhood was spent travelling widely. You were married when still virtually a child, as was the custom in your country; your husband was Richard Eysenach, a banker; you lost your husband in 1912. You belong to that transient circle of socialites who have no home or ties in any one particular place. You have stated that since your husband died, you have lived in South America, North America, Poland, Italy, Spain, to name but a few ... without

counting the numerous cruises on your yacht that you sold in 1930. You are extremely wealthy. You inherited your fortune partly from your mother, partly from your dead husband. You lived in France on several occasions before the war and you settled here in 1928. Between 1914 and 1915 you lived near Antibes. That place and time must evoke sad memories for you: it was there that your only child, a daughter, died in 1915. After this misfortune, your life became even more unstable; you wandered from place to place. You had numerous short-lived love affairs in the period following the war, when the social climate was favourable to amorous adventures. Finally, in 1930, through mutual friends, you met Count Aldo Monti, who comes from a well-established, honourable Italian family. He asked you to marry him. The marriage was agreed, was it not?’

‘Yes,’ Gladys Eysenbach replied quietly.

‘Your engagement was more or less official. Suddenly you decided to break it off. For what reason? You refuse to answer? Presumably you did not wish to relinquish your free, self-indulgent lifestyle and all the advantages it brought. Your fiancé became your lover. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘There is no sign of any other affair between 1930 and October 1934. You were faithful to Count Monti for four years. A chance encounter brought you into contact with the person who was to become your victim. He was a boy of twenty, Bernard Martin, son of a former butler and of a poor background. It is this fact that wounded your pride and was undoubtedly the reason why you denied for so long, against all the evidence, that you were having a relationship with the victim. Bernard Martin, a student at the Faculty of Literature, residing at 6 rue des Fossés-Saint-Jacques, Paris, twenty years of age, managed to seduce you, a woman of the world, who was very beautiful, rich and admired. Well? You have nothing to say? It seems that, bizarrely, scandalously, you gave in to him almost

immediately; you corrupted him, gave him money and finally killed him. It is for this crime that you are on trial today.'

The defendant slowly clasped her trembling hands together; her nails dug deep into her pale skin; her colourless lips opened slightly, with difficulty, but she uttered not a word, not a sound.

'Tell the gentlemen of the jury how you met him,' the Judge said once more. 'You have nothing to say?'

'He followed me one evening,' she finally said, quietly. 'It was last autumn. I ... I can't remember the exact date. No, I can't remember,' she repeated, sounding distraught.

'You gave the date as 12 October in your official statement.'

'Possibly,' she murmured. 'I don't remember ...'

'Did he ... proposition you? Come now, answer me. I understand that such an admission must be painful to you. You went home with him that very night.'

'No, no! It isn't true!' she cried softly. 'Listen to me ...'

She said a few muffled words that no one could hear, then fell silent.

'Answer me,' said the Judge.

The accused woman turned towards the jury and the crowd of people who were watching her intently. She made a weary gesture of despair and sighed. 'I have nothing to say.'

'Well, then, you will answer my questions. You claim that you refused to speak to him that evening. Yet our enquiries have proven that the next day, 13 October, you went to see him at his home on the rue des Fossés-Saint-Jacques. Is that correct?'

'Yes,' she said. Blood rushed to her cheeks as she replied, then slowly receded, leaving her pale and trembling.

'So you were in the habit of speaking to young men who accosted you in the street? Or did you find this boy

particularly attractive? You have nothing to say? You have renounced your right to secrecy about your private life. In the High Court, in this public hearing, all the facts must be examined.'

'Yes,' she replied wearily.

'So you went to see him. What happened next? Did you see him again?'

'Yes.'

'How many times?'

'I don't remember.'

'You found him attractive? Were you in love with him?'

'No.'

'Well, then, why did you let him seduce you? Out of perversion? Out of fear? Did you fear his threats of blackmail? After his death, not a single letter from you was found at his home. Did you write to him often?'

'No.'

'Did you fear he would be indiscreet? Were you afraid that Count Monti would come to learn of your mad behaviour, your shameful affair? Was that it? Did Bernard Martin love you? Or was he pursuing you out of self-interest? You don't know? Let us move on now to the question of money. To avoid tarnishing the memory of your victim, you did not reveal a fact that came to light by chance during our enquiries. How much money did you give to Bernard Martin during your brief affair that lasted from 13 October 1934 to 24 December of the same year? The unfortunate young man was murdered on the night of Christmas Eve 1934. How much money did he receive from you during those two months?'

'I didn't give him any money.'

'Yes you did. We found a cheque dated 15 November 1934 for the sum of five thousand francs made payable to him and signed by you. The money was deposited the following day. No one knows what it was used for. Did you give him any more money?'

'No.'

'Another cheque for five thousand francs was also found. It seems to be a fixed amount but it was never cashed.'

'That's right,' murmured the defendant.

'Let us move on to the crime itself, shall we? I assume it's not as difficult to talk about it as it was to do it. On that night, Christmas Eve of last year, you left your house at eight-thirty in the evening with Count Monti. You dined with him at a restaurant, Chez Ciro. You were to meet your mutual friends, the Perciers, Henri Percier, a Minister in the current government, and his wife. All four of you went to a nightclub where you danced until three o'clock in the morning. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'Count Monti took you home and said goodbye to you at your door. In your statement, you claimed that when the car stopped in front of your house, you spotted Bernard Martin hiding in the doorway. That is correct, is it not? Had you agreed to meet him that night?'

'No. I hadn't seen him for some time'

'Exactly how long had it been?'

'About ten days.'

'Why? You had decided to break it off? You refuse to answer? When you saw him in the street that December morning, what did he say to you?'

'He wanted to come inside.'

'And then?'

'I refused. He was drunk, that much was obvious. I was afraid. When I opened the door, I realised he'd followed me in. He came into my bedroom.'

'What did he say to you?'

'He threatened to tell everything to Aldo Monti, whom I loved.'

'You had a strange way of showing him your love!'

'I loved him,' she insisted.

'And then?'

'I was frightened. I begged him. He laughed at me. He pushed me aside. At that very moment, the telephone rang. Only Aldo Monti would be calling me at that hour. Bernard Martin grabbed the telephone. He wanted to answer it. I ... I took the gun from the drawer of my bedside table. I fired ... I didn't know what I was doing any more.'

'Really? That's what murderers always say.'

'It's still the truth,' Gladys Eysenach said quietly.

'Let us assume so. When you realised what had happened, what did you do?'

'He was lying there in front of me, dead. I wanted to try to resuscitate him, but I could see it was too late.'

'And then?'

'Then ... My chambermaid called the police. That's everything.'

'Really? And when the police arrived and the crime was discovered, you openly admitted what you had done?'

'No.'

'What did you say?'

'I said that I had just got home,' replied Gladys Eysenach in a choked voice, 'and that while I was undressing in the adjoining bathroom, I heard a noise and opened the door to find an intruder.'

'Who was about to steal your jewellery, the jewellery you'd taken off and left on the dressing table, isn't that so?'

'Yes, that's correct.'

'The lie was quite believable,' said the Judge, turning towards the jury, 'for the great wealth and social position of the accused easily placed her beyond suspicion. Unfortunately for her, when the detectives arrived, the defendant was still wearing her ermine coat, evening gown and all her jewellery. The next day the examining magistrate interrogated her in the most skilful way. I would not hesitate in deeming her deposition a model of its type. It is excellent. It is cruel, I do not deny this, but excellent. This woman hesitates, ties herself up in knots, as the

common saying goes, becomes confused, lies, withdraws her statements. She swears, and so very sincerely, that Bernard Martin was never her lover, insisting upon this fact in spite of all the plausible, logical evidence. She cries, she begs and, finally, she confesses. The examining magistrate skilfully and concisely analyses the situation, questions her intensely and succeeds in reconstructing the events, which prove, alas, quite commonplace. An ageing woman, attracted by the youth of this boy, enticed by a stranger, by the excitement of a sexual encounter, perhaps even by the humble situation of her lover – who can say? This woman, a woman who was clearly bored by her affairs with men of her own social status, yields to him, then wishes to break it off, believing, with the arrogance of a wealthy woman, that her lover has been paid off, that he will be content with her charity, that he will disappear out of her life. But this young boy – who has never known any women apart from prostitutes and girls he’s met at cafés – cannot forget her beauty, her prestige. He pursues her, threatens her. She becomes frightened and kills him. This deposition is truly moving. At every question the magistrates asks, she first tries to defend herself, then confesses, replying “yes, yes” ... This word constantly recurs. She explains nothing. She is ashamed. She is wasting away out of shame, as you can see, gentlemen of the jury! But the analysis of her crime, the chain of events proposed to her is so believable, so crystal clear, so logical that she cannot defend herself. “Yes”, she keeps saying and “Yes” to the most serious question: “Was the murder premeditated?” She then retracts her statement, realising the importance of her response. She claims she committed the murder in a moment of madness. Why, then, I ask the defendant, why did you live your entire life without owning a weapon and yet within three weeks of meeting Bernard Martin you bought a gun, a gun which you kept with you at all times?’

‘No, it was kept in a drawer in my bedside table.’

'Why did you buy it?'

'I don't know ...'

'That's rather an odd reply. Come, now, tell the truth! Did you plan to kill Bernard Martin?'

'No,' she replied, her voice shaking, 'I swear it.'

'Whom did you intend to use it on then? Yourself? Count Monti, who was apparently making you feel jealous? A rival?'

'No, no,' the accused woman replied, hiding her face in her hands. 'No more questions! I won't say anything else. I've confessed to everything, everything you wanted me to!'

'Very well, then. We shall proceed to the testimony of the witnesses. Usher, bring in the first witness.'

A woman walked in; tears were streaming down her sallow face; her glistening eyes looked with terror from the dock to the Judges in their scarlet robes. Outside, the rain kept falling with its steady pattering. One of the journalists was getting bored; he jotted down sentences on the sheet of paper in front of him that could have come straight out of a novel: 'The wind drew deep sighs from the golden plane trees that lined the Seine.'

'State your full name.'

'Flora Adèle Larivière.'

'State your age.'

'Thirty-two.'

'Your profession?'

'Personal chambermaid to Madame Eysenach.'

'You are not being sworn in, so I am invoking my discretionary powers to question you. When did you first enter the service of the accused?'

'It will be seven years on the 19 January.'

'Tell us what you know of the crime. Your mistress was to celebrate Christmas Eve in the company of Count Monti, was she not?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'Did she tell you what time she would be coming home?'