

NANA

by

Emile Zola

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CHAPTER I

AT NINE O’CLOCK in the evening the body of the house at the Theatres des Varietes was still all but empty. A few individuals, it is true, were sitting quietly waiting in the balcony and stalls, but these were lost, as it were, among the ranges of seats whose coverings of cardinal velvet loomed in the subdued light of the dimly burning luster. A shadow enveloped the great red splash of the curtain, and not a sound came from the stage, the unlit footlights, the scattered desks of the orchestra. It was only high overhead in the third gallery, round the domed ceiling where nude females and children flew in heavens which had turned green in the gaslight, that calls and laugh-

ter were audible above a continuous hubbub of voices, and heads in women’s and workmen’s caps were ranged, row above row, under the wide-vaulted bays with their gilt-surrounding adornments. Every few seconds an attendant would make her appearance, bustling along with tickets in her hand and piloting in front of her a gentleman and a lady, who took their seats, he in his evening dress, she sitting slim and undulant beside him while her eyes wandered slowly round the house.

Two young men appeared in the stalls; they kept standing and looked about them.

“Didn’t I say so, Hector?” cried the elder of the two, a tall fellow with little black mustaches. “We’re too early! You might quite well have allowed me to finish my cigar.”

An attendant was passing.

“Oh, Monsieur Fauchery,” she said familiarly, “it won’t begin for half an hour yet!”

“Then why do they advertise for nine o’clock?” muttered Hector, whose long thin face assumed an expression of vexation. “Only this morning Clarisse, who’s in the piece, swore that they’d begin at nine o’clock punctually.”

For a moment they remained silent and, looking upward, scanned the shadowy boxes. But the green paper with which

these were hung rendered them more shadowy still. Down below, under the dress circle, the lower boxes were buried in utter night. In those on the second tier there was only one stout lady, who was stranded, as it were, on the velvet-covered balustrade in front of her. On the right hand and on the left, between lofty pilasters, the stage boxes, bedraped with long-fringed scalloped hangings, remained untenanted. The house with its white and gold, relieved by soft green tones, lay only half disclosed to view, as though full of a fine dust shed from the little jets of flame in the great glass luster.

“Did you get your stage box for Lucy?” asked Hector.

“Yes,” replied his companion, “but I had some trouble to get it. Oh, there’s no danger of Lucy coming too early!”

He stifled a slight yawn; then after a pause:

“You’re in luck’s way, you are, since you haven’t been at a first night before. The Blonde Venus will be the event of the year. People have been talking about it for six months. Oh, such music, my dear boy! Such a sly dog, Bordenave! He knows his business and has kept this for the exhibition season.” Hector was religiously attentive. He asked a question.

“And Nana, the new star who’s going to play Venus, d’you know her?”

“There you are; you’re beginning again!” cried Fauchery, casting up his arms. “Ever since this morning people have been dreeing me with Nana. I’ve met more than twenty people, and it’s Nana here and Nana there! What do I know? Am I acquainted with all the light ladies in Paris? Nana is an invention of Bordenave’s! It must be a fine one!”

He calmed himself, but the emptiness of the house, the dim light of the luster, the churchlike sense of self-absorption which the place inspired, full as it was of whispering voices and the sound of doors banging—all these got on his nerves.

“No, by Jove,” he said all of a sudden, “one’s hair turns gray here. I—I’m going out. Perhaps we shall find Bordenave downstairs. He’ll give us information about things.”

Downstairs in the great marble-paved entrance hall, where the box office was, the public were beginning to show themselves. Through the three open gates might have been observed, passing in, the ardent life of the boulevards, which were all astir and aflame under the fine April night. The sound of carriage wheels kept stopping suddenly; carriage doors were noisily shut again, and people began entering in small groups, taking their stand before the ticket bureau

and climbing the double flight of stairs at the end of the hall, up which the women loitered with swaying hips. Under the crude gaslight, round the pale, naked walls of the entrance hall, which with its scanty First Empire decorations suggested the peristyle of a toy temple, there was a flaring display of lofty yellow posters bearing the name of “Nana” in great black letters. Gentlemen, who seemed to be glued to the entry, were reading them; others, standing about, were engaged in talk, barring the doors of the house in so doing, while hard by the box office a thickset man with an extensive, close-shaven visage was giving rough answers to such as pressed to engage seats.

“There’s Bordenave,” said Fauchery as he came down the stairs. But the manager had already seen him.

“Ah, ah! You’re a nice fellow!” he shouted at him from a distance. “That’s the way you give me a notice, is it? Why, I opened my Figaro this morning—never a word!”

“Wait a bit,” replied Fauchery. “I certainly must make the acquaintance of your Nana before talking about her. Besides, I’ve made no promises.”

Then to put an end to the discussion, he introduced his cousin, M. Hector de la Faloise, a young man who had come to finish his education in Paris. The manager took

the young man’s measure at a glance. But Hector returned his scrutiny with deep interest. This, then, was that Bordenave, that showman of the sex who treated women like a convict overseer, that clever fellow who was always at full steam over some advertising dodge, that shouting, spitting, thigh-slapping fellow, that cynic with the soul of a policeman! Hector was under the impression that he ought to discover some amiable observation for the occasion.

“Your theater—” he began in dulcet tones.

Bordenave interrupted him with a savage phrase, as becomes a man who dotes on frank situations.

“Call it my brothel!”

At this Fauchery laughed approvingly, while La Faloise stopped with his pretty speech strangled in his throat, feeling very much shocked and striving to appear as though he enjoyed the phrase. The manager had dashed off to shake hands with a dramatic critic whose column had considerable influence. When he returned La Faloise was recovering. He was afraid of being treated as a provincial if he showed himself too much nonplused.

“I have been told,” he began again, longing positively to find something to say, “that Nana has a delicious voice.”

“Nana?” cried the manager, shrugging his shoulders. “The

voice of a squirt!”

The young man made haste to add:

“Besides being a first-rate comedian!”

“She? Why she’s a lump! She has no notion what to do with her hands and feet.”

La Faloise blushed a little. He had lost his bearings. He stammered:

“I wouldn’t have missed this first representation tonight for the world. I was aware that your theater—”

“Call it my brothel,” Bordenave again interpolated with the frigid obstinacy of a man convinced.

Meanwhile Fauchery, with extreme calmness, was looking at the women as they came in. He went to his cousin’s rescue when he saw him all at sea and doubtful whether to laugh or to be angry.

“Do be pleasant to Bordenave—call his theater what he wishes you to, since it amuses him. And you, my dear fellow, don’t keep us waiting about for nothing. If your Nana neither sings nor acts you’ll find you’ve made a blunder, that’s all. It’s what I’m afraid of, if the truth be told.”

“A blunder! A blunder!” shouted the manager, and his face grew purple. “Must a woman know how to act and sing? Oh, my chicken, you’re too *stoopid*. Nana has other

good points, by heaven!—something which is as good as all the other things put together. I’ve smelled it out; it’s deuced pronounced with her, or I’ve got the scent of an idiot. You’ll see, you’ll see! She’s only got to come on, and all the house will be gaping at her.”

He had held up his big hands which were trembling under the influence of his eager enthusiasm, and now, having relieved his feelings, he lowered his voice and grumbled to himself:

“Yes, she’ll go far! Oh yes, s’elp me, she’ll go far! A skin—oh, what a skin she’s got!”

Then as Fauchery began questioning him he consented to enter into a detailed explanation, couched in phraseology so crude that Hector de la Faloise felt slightly disgusted. He had been thick with Nana, and he was anxious to start her on the stage. Well, just about that time he was in search of a Venus. He—he never let a woman encumber him for any length of time; he preferred to let the public enjoy the benefit of her forthwith. But there was a deuce of a row going on in his shop, which had been turned topsyturvy by that big damsel’s advent. Rose Mignon, his star, a comic actress of much subtlety and an adorable singer, was daily threatening to leave him in the lurch, for she was fu-

rious and guessed the presence of a rival. And as for the bill, good God! What a noise there had been about it all! It had ended by his deciding to print the names of the two actresses in the same-sized type. But it wouldn't do to bother him. Whenever any of his little women, as he called them—Simonne or Clarisse, for instance—wouldn't go the way he wanted her to he just up with his foot and caught her one in the rear. Otherwise life was impossible. Oh yes, he sold 'em; *he* knew what they fetched, the wenches!

"Tut!" he cried, breaking off short. "Mignon and Steiner. Always together. You know, Steiner's getting sick of Rose; that's why the husband dogs his steps now for fear of his slipping away."

On the pavement outside, the row of gas jets flaring on the cornice of the theater cast a patch of brilliant light. Two small trees, violently green, stood sharply out against it, and a column gleamed in such vivid illumination that one could read the notices thereon at a distance, as though in broad daylight, while the dense night of the boulevard beyond was dotted with lights above the vague outline of an ever-moving crowd. Many men did not enter the theater at once but stayed outside to talk while finishing their cigars under the rays of the line of gas jets, which shed a

sallow pallor on their faces and silhouetted their short black shadows on the asphalt. Mignon, a very tall, very broad fellow, with the square-shaped head of a strong man at a fair, was forcing a passage through the midst of the groups and dragging on his arm the banker Steiner, an exceedingly small man with a corporation already in evidence and a round face framed in a setting of beard which was already growing gray.

"Well," said Bordenave to the banker, "you met her yesterday in my office."

"Ah! It was she, was it?" ejaculated Steiner. "I suspected as much. Only I was coming out as she was going in, and I scarcely caught a glimpse of her."

Mignon was listening with half-closed eyelids and nervously twisting a great diamond ring round his finger. He had quite understood that Nana was in question. Then as Bordenave was drawing a portrait of his new star, which lit a flame in the eyes of the banker, he ended by joining in the conversation.

"Oh, let her alone, my dear fellow; she's a low lot! The public will show her the door in quick time. Steiner, my laddie, you know that my wife is waiting for you in her box."

He wanted to take possession of him again. But Steiner would not quit Bordenave. In front of them a stream of people was crowding and crushing against the ticket office, and there was a din of voices, in the midst of which the name of Nana sounded with all the melodious vivacity of its two syllables. The men who stood planted in front of the notices kept spelling it out loudly; others, in an interrogative tone, uttered it as they passed; while the women, at once restless and smiling, repeated it softly with an air of surprise. Nobody knew Nana. Whence had Nana fallen? And stories and jokes, whispered from ear to ear, went the round of the crowd. The name was a caress in itself; it was a pet name, the very familiarity of which suited every lip. Merely through enunciating it thus, the throng worked itself into a state of gaiety and became highly good natured. A fever of curiosity urged it forward, that kind of Parisian curiosity which is as violent as an access of positive unreason. Everybody wanted to see Nana. A lady had the flounce of her dress torn off; a man lost his hat.

“Oh, you’re asking me too many questions about it!” cried Bordenave, whom a score of men were besieging with their queries. “You’re going to see her, and I’m off; they want me.”

He disappeared, enchanted at having fired his public. Mignon shrugged his shoulders, reminding Steiner that Rose was awaiting him in order to show him the costume she was about to wear in the first act.

“By Jove! There’s Lucy out there, getting down from her carriage,” said La Faloise to Fauchery.

It was, in fact, Lucy Stewart, a plain little woman, some forty years old, with a disproportionately long neck, a thin, drawn face, a heavy mouth, but withal of such brightness, such graciousness of manner, that she was really very charming. She was bringing with her Caroline Hequet and her mother—Caroline a woman of a cold type of beauty, the mother a person of a most worthy demeanor, who looked as if she were stuffed with straw.

“You’re coming with us? I’ve kept a place for you,” she said to Fauchery. “Oh, decidedly not! To see nothing!” he made answer. “I’ve a stall; I prefer being in the stalls.”

Lucy grew nettled. Did he not dare show himself in her company? Then, suddenly restraining herself and skipping to another topic:

“Why haven’t you told me that you knew Nana?”

“Nana! I’ve never set eyes on her.”

“Honor bright? I’ve been told that you’ve been to bed

with her.”

But Mignon, coming in front of them, his finger to his lips, made them a sign to be silent. And when Lucy questioned him he pointed out a young man who was passing and murmured:

“Nana’s fancy man.”

Everybody looked at him. He was a pretty fellow. Fauchery recognized him; it was Daguenet, a young man who had run through three hundred thousand francs in the pursuit of women and who now was dabbling in stocks, in order from time to time to treat them to bouquets and dinners. Lucy made the discovery that he had fine eyes.

“Ah, there’s Blanche!” she cried. “It’s she who told me that you had been to bed with Nana.”

Blanche de Sivry, a great fair girl, whose good-looking face showed signs of growing fat, made her appearance in the company of a spare, sedulously well-groomed and extremely distinguished man.

“The Count Xavier de Vandeuves,” Fauchery whispered in his companion’s ear.

The count and the journalist shook hands, while Blanche and Lucy entered into a brisk, mutual explanation. One of them in blue, the other in rose-pink, they stood blocking

the way with their deeply flounced skirts, and Nana’s name kept repeating itself so shrilly in their conversation that people began to listen to them. The Count de Vandeuves carried Blanche off. But by this time Nana’s name was echoing more loudly than ever round the four walls of the entrance hall amid yearnings sharpened by delay. Why didn’t the play begin? The men pulled out their watches; late-comers sprang from their conveyances before these had fairly drawn up; the groups left the sidewalk, where the passers-by were crossing the now-vacant space of gaslit pavement, craning their necks, as they did so, in order to get a peep into the theater. A street boy came up whistling and planted himself before a notice at the door, then cried out, “Woa, Nana!” in the voice of a tipsy man and hied on his way with a rolling gait and a shuffling of his old boots. A laugh had arisen at this. Gentlemen of unimpeachable appearance repeated: “Nana, woa, Nana!” People were crushing; a dispute arose at the ticket office, and there was a growing clamor caused by the hum of voices calling on Nana, demanding Nana in one of those accesses of silly facetiousness and sheer animalism which pass over mobs.

But above all the din the bell that precedes the rise of the curtain became audible. “They’ve rung; they’ve rung!” The

rumor reached the boulevard, and thereupon followed a stampede, everyone wanting to pass in, while the servants of the theater increased their forces. Mignon, with an anxious air, at last got hold of Steiner again, the latter not having been to see Rose's costume. At the very first tinkle of the bell La Faloise had cloven a way through the crowd, pulling Fauchery with him, so as not to miss the opening scene. But all this eagerness on the part of the public irritated Lucy Stewart. What brutes were these people to be pushing women like that! She stayed in the rear of them all with Caroline Hequet and her mother. The entrance hall was now empty, while beyond it was still heard the long-drawn rumble of the boulevard.

"As though they were always funny, those pieces of theirs!" Lucy kept repeating as she climbed the stair.

In the house Fauchery and La Faloise, in front of their stalls, were gazing about them anew. By this time the house was resplendent. High jets of gas illumined the great glass chandelier with a rustling of yellow and rosy flames, which rained down a stream of brilliant light from dome to floor. The cardinal velvets of the seats were shot with hues of lake, while all the gilding shone again, the soft green decorations chastening its effect beneath the too-decided paint-

ings of the ceiling. The footlights were turned up and with a vivid flood of brilliance lit up the curtain, the heavy purple drapery of which had all the richness befitting a palace in a fairy tale and contrasted with the meanness of the proscenium, where cracks showed the plaster under the gilding. The place was already warm. At their music stands the orchestra were tuning their instruments amid a delicate trilling of flutes, a stifled tooting of horns, a singing of violin notes, which floated forth amid the increasing uproar of voices. All the spectators were talking, jostling, settling themselves in a general assault upon seats; and the hustling rush in the side passages was now so violent that every door into the house was laboriously admitting the inexhaustible flood of people. There were signals, rustlings of fabrics, a continual march past of skirts and head dresses, accentuated by the black hue of a dress coat or a surtout. Notwithstanding this, the rows of seats were little by little getting filled up, while here and there a light toilet stood out from its surroundings, a head with a delicate profile bent forward under its chignon, where flashed the lightning of a jewel. In one of the boxes the tip of a bare shoulder glimmered like snowy silk. Other ladies, sitting at ease, languidly fanned themselves, following with their gaze the

pushing movements of the crowd, while young gentlemen, standing up in the stalls, their waistcoats cut very low, gardenias in their buttonholes, pointed their opera glasses with gloved finger tips.

It was now that the two cousins began searching for the faces of those they knew. Mignon and Steiner were together in a lower box, sitting side by side with their arms leaning for support on the velvet balustrade. Blanche de Sivry seemed to be in sole possession of a stage box on the level of the stalls. But La Faloise examined Daguinet before anyone else, he being in occupation of a stall two rows in front of his own. Close to him, a very young man, seventeen years old at the outside, some truant from college, it may be, was straining wide a pair of fine eyes such as a cherub might have owned. Fauchery smiled when he looked at him.

“Who is that lady in the balcony?” La Faloise asked suddenly. “The lady with a young girl in blue beside her.”

He pointed out a large woman who was excessively tight-laced, a woman who had been a blonde and had now become white and yellow of tint, her broad face, reddened with paint, looking puffy under a rain of little childish curls.

“It’s Gaga,” was Fauchery’s simple reply, and as this name seemed to astound his cousin, he added:

“You don’t know Gaga? She was the delight of the early years of Louis Philippe. Nowadays she drags her daughter about with her wherever she goes.”

La Faloise never once glanced at the young girl. The sight of Gaga moved him; his eyes did not leave her again. He still found her very good looking but he dared not say so.

Meanwhile the conductor lifted his violin bow and the orchestra attacked the overture. People still kept coming in; the stir and noise were on the increase. Among that public, peculiar to first nights and never subject to change, there were little subsections composed of intimate friends, who smilingly forgathered again. Old first-nighters, hat on head, seemed familiar and quite at ease and kept exchanging salutations. All Paris was there, the Paris of literature, of finance and of pleasure. There were many journalists, several authors, a number of stock-exchange people and more courtesans than honest women. It was a singularly mixed world, composed, as it was, of all the talents and tarnished by all the vices, a world where the same fatigue and the same fever played over every face. Fauchery, whom his cousin was questioning, showed him the boxes devoted to the newspapers and to the clubs and then named the dramatic critics—a lean, dried-up individual with thin, spite-

ful lips and, chief of all, a big fellow with a good-natured expression, lolling on the shoulder of his neighbor, a young miss over whom he brooded with tender and paternal eyes.

But he interrupted himself on seeing La Faloise in the act of bowing to some persons who occupied the box opposite. He appeared surprised.

“What?” he queried. “You know the Count Muffat de Beuville?”

“Oh, for a long time back,” replied Hector. “The Muffats had a property near us. I often go to their house. The count’s with his wife and his father-in-law, the Marquis de Chouard.”

And with some vanity—for he was happy in his cousin’s astonishment—he entered into particulars. The marquis was a councilor of state; the count had recently been appointed chamberlain to the empress. Fauchery, who had caught up his opera glass, looked at the countess, a plump brunette with a white skin and fine dark eyes.

“You shall present me to them between the acts,” he ended by saying. “I have already met the count, but I should like to go to them on their Tuesdays.”

Energetic cries of “Hush” came from the upper galleries. The overture had begun, but people were still coming in.

Late arrivals were obliging whole rows of spectators to rise; the doors of boxes were banging; loud voices were heard disputing in the passages. And there was no cessation of the sound of many conversations, a sound similar to the loud twittering of talkative sparrows at close of day. All was in confusion; the house was a medley of heads and arms which moved to and fro, their owners seating themselves or trying to make themselves comfortable or, on the other hand, excitedly endeavoring to remain standing so as to take a final look round. The cry of “Sit down, sit down!” came fiercely from the obscure depths of the pit. A shiver of expectation traversed the house: at last people were going to make the acquaintance of this famous Nana with whom Paris had been occupying itself for a whole week!

Little by little, however, the buzz of talk dwindled softly down among occasional fresh outbursts of rough speech. And amid this swooning murmur, these perishing sighs of sound, the orchestra struck up the small, lively notes of a waltz with a vagabond rhythm bubbling with roguish laughter. The public were titillated; they were already on the grin. But the gang of clappers in the foremost rows of the pit applauded furiously. The curtain rose.

“By George!” exclaimed La Faloise, still talking away.

“There’s a man with Lucy.”

He was looking at the stage box on the second tier to his right, the front of which Caroline and Lucy were occupying. At the back of this box were observable the worthy countenance of Caroline’s mother and the side face of a tall young man with a noble head of light hair and an irreproachable getup.

“Do look!” La Faloise again insisted. “There’s a man there.”

Fauchery decided to level his opera glass at the stage box. But he turned round again directly.

“Oh, it’s Labordette,” he muttered in a careless voice, as though that gentle man’s presence ought to strike all the world as though both natural and immaterial.

Behind the cousins people shouted “Silence!” They had to cease talking. A motionless fit now seized the house, and great stretches of heads, all erect and attentive, sloped away from stalls to topmost gallery. The first act of the *Blonde Venus* took place in Olympus, a pasteboard Olympus, with clouds in the wings and the throne of Jupiter on the right of the stage. First of all Iris and Ganymede, aided by a troupe of celestial attendants, sang a chorus while they arranged the seats of the gods for the council.

Once again the prearranged applause of the clappers alone burst forth; the public, a little out of their depth, sat waiting. Nevertheless, La Faloise had clapped Clarisse Besnus, one of Bordenave’s little women, who played Iris in a soft blue dress with a great scarf of the seven colors of the rainbow looped round her waist.

“You know, she draws up her chemise to put that on,” he said to Fauchery, loud enough to be heard by those around him. “We tried the trick this morning. It was all up under her arms and round the small of her back.”

But a slight rustling movement ran through the house; Rose Mignon had just come on the stage as Diana. Now though she had neither the face nor the figure for the part, being thin and dark and of the adorable type of ugliness peculiar to a Parisian street child, she nonetheless appeared charming and as though she were a satire on the personage she represented. Her song at her entrance on the stage was full of lines quaint enough to make you cry with laughter and of complaints about Mars, who was getting ready to desert her for the companionship of Venus. She sang it with a chaste reserve so full of sprightly suggestiveness that the public warmed amain. The husband and Steiner, sitting side by side, were laughing complaisantly, and the

whole house broke out in a roar when Prulliere, that great favorite, appeared as a general, a masquerade Mars, decked with an enormous plume and dragging along a sword, the hilt of which reached to his shoulder. As for him, he had had enough of Diana; she had been a great deal too coy with him, he averred. Thereupon Diana promised to keep a sharp eye on him and to be revenged. The duet ended with a comic yodel which Prulliere delivered very amusingly with the yell of an angry tomcat. He had about him all the entertaining fatuity of a young leading gentleman whose love affairs prosper, and he rolled around the most swagging glances, which excited shrill feminine laughter in the boxes.

Then the public cooled again, for the ensuing scenes were found tiresome. Old Bosc, an imbecile Jupiter with head crushed beneath the weight of an immense crown, only just succeeded in raising a smile among his audience when he had a domestic altercation with Juno on the subject of the cook's accounts. The march past of the gods, Neptune, Pluto, Minerva and the rest, was well-nigh spoiling everything. People grew impatient; there was a restless, slowly growing murmur; the audience ceased to take an interest in the performance and looked round at the house.

Lucy began laughing with Labordette; the Count de Vandevres was craning his neck in conversation behind Blanche's sturdy shoulders, while Fauchery, out of the corners of his eyes, took stock of the Muffats, of whom the count appeared very serious, as though he had not understood the allusions, and the countess smiled vaguely, her eyes lost in reverie. But on a sudden, in this uncomfortable state of things, the applause of the clapping contingent rattled out with the regularity of platoon firing. People turned toward the stage. Was it Nana at last? This Nana made one wait with a vengeance.

It was a deputation of mortals whom Ganymede and Iris had introduced, respectable middle-class persons, deceived husbands, all of them, and they came before the master of the gods to proffer a complaint against Venus, who was assuredly inflaming their good ladies with an excess of ardor. The chorus, in quaint, dolorous tones, broken by silences full of pantomimic admissions, caused great amusement. A neat phrase went the round of the house: "The cuckolds' chorus, the cuckolds' chorus," and it "caught on," for there was an encore. The singers' heads were droll; their faces were discovered to be in keeping with the phrase, especially that of a fat man which was as round as the moon.

Meanwhile Vulcan arrived in a towering rage, demanding back his wife who had slipped away three days ago. The chorus resumed their plaint, calling on Vulcan, the god of the cuckolds. Vulcan's part was played by Fontan, a comic actor of talent, at once vulgar and original, and he had a role of the wildest whimsicality and was got up as a village blacksmith, fiery red wig, bare arms tattooed with arrow-pierced hearts and all the rest of it. A woman's voice cried in a very high key, "Oh, isn't he ugly?" and all the ladies laughed and applauded.

Then followed a scene which seemed interminable. Jupiter in the course of it seemed never to be going to finish assembling the Council of Gods in order to submit thereto the deceived husband's requests. And still no Nana! Was the management keeping Nana for the fall of the curtain then? So long a period of expectancy had ended by annoying the public. Their murmurings began again.

"It's going badly," said Mignon radiantly to Steiner. "She'll get a pretty reception; you'll see!"

At that very moment the clouds at the back of the stage were cloven apart and Venus appeared. Exceedingly tall, exceedingly strong, for her eighteen years, Nana, in her goddess's white tunic and with her light hair simply flow-

ing unfastened over her shoulders, came down to the footlights with a quiet certainty of movement and a laugh of greeting for the public and struck up her grand ditty:

"When Venus roams at eventide."

From the second verse onward people looked at each other all over the house. Was this some jest, some wager on Bordenave's part? Never had a more tuneless voice been heard or one managed with less art. Her manager judged of her excellently; she certainly sang like a squirt. Nay, more, she didn't even know how to deport herself on the stage: she thrust her arms in front of her while she swayed her whole body to and fro in a manner which struck the audience as unbecoming and disagreeable. Cries of "Oh, oh!" were already rising in the pit and the cheap places. There was a sound of whistling, too, when a voice in the stalls, suggestive of a molting cockerel, cried out with great conviction:

"That's very smart!"

All the house looked round. It was the cherub, the truant from the boarding-school, who sat with his fine eyes very wide open and his fair face glowing very hotly at sight of Nana. When he saw everybody turning toward him he grew extremely red at the thought of having thus unconsciously

spoken aloud. Dagueuet, his neighbor, smilingly examined him; the public laughed, as though disarmed and no longer anxious to hiss; while the young gentlemen in white gloves, fascinated in their turn by Nana's gracious contours, lolled back in their seats and applauded.

"That's it! Well done! Bravo!"

Nana, in the meantime, seeing the house laughing, began to laugh herself. The gaiety of all redoubled itself. She was an amusing creature, all the same, was that fine girl! Her laughter made a love of a little dimple appear in her chin. She stood there waiting, not bored in the least, familiar with her audience, falling into step with them at once, as though she herself were admitting with a wink that she had not two farthings' worth of talent but that it did not matter at all, that, in fact, she had other good points. And then after having made a sign to the conductor which plainly signified, "Go ahead, old boy!" she began her second verse:

"'Tis Venus who at midnight passes—"

Still the same acidulated voice, only that now it tickled the public in the right quarter so deftly that momentarily it caused them to give a little shiver of pleasure. Nana still smiled her smile: it lit up her little red mouth and shone in her great eyes, which were of the clearest blue. When she

came to certain rather lively verses a delicate sense of enjoyment made her tilt her nose, the rosy nostrils of which lifted and fell, while a bright flush suffused her cheeks. She still swung herself up and down, for she only knew how to do that. And the trick was no longer voted ugly; on the contrary, the men raised their opera glasses. When she came to the end of a verse her voice completely failed her, and she was well aware that she never would get through with it. Thereupon, rather than fret herself, she kicked up her leg, which forthwith was roundly outlined under her diaphanous tunic, bent sharply backward, so that her bosom was thrown upward and forward, and stretched her arms out. Applause burst forth on all sides. In the twinkling of an eye she had turned on her heel and was going up the stage, presenting the nape of her neck to the spectators' gaze, a neck where the red-gold hair showed like some animal's fell. Then the plaudits became frantic.

The close of the act was not so exciting. Vulcan wanted to slap Venus. The gods held a consultation and decided to go and hold an inquiry on earth before granting the deceived husband satisfaction. It was then that Diana surprised a tender conversation between Venus and Mars and vowed that she would not take her eyes off them during

the whole of the voyage. There was also a scene where Love, played by a little twelve-year-old chit, answered every question put to her with “Yes, Mamma! No, Mamma!” in a winy-piny tone, her fingers in her nose. At last Jupiter, with the severity of a master who is growing cross, shut Love up in a dark closet, bidding her conjugate the verb “I love” twenty times. The finale was more appreciated: it was a chorus which both troupe and orchestra performed with great brilliancy. But the curtain once down, the clappers tried in vain to obtain a call, while the whole house was already up and making for the doors.

The crowd trampled and jostled, jammed, as it were, between the rows of seats, and in so doing exchanged expressions. One phrase only went round:

“It’s idiotic.” A critic was saying that it would be one’s duty to do a pretty bit of slashing. The piece, however, mattered very little, for people were talking about Nana before everything else. Fauchery and La Faloise, being among the earliest to emerge, met Steiner and Mignon in the passage outside the stalls. In this gaslit gut of a place, which was as narrow and circumscribed as a gallery in a mine, one was well-nigh suffocated. They stopped a moment at the foot of the stairs on the right of the house,

protected by the final curve of the balusters. The audience from the cheap places were coming down the steps with a continuous tramp of heavy boots; a stream of black dress coats was passing, while an attendant was making every possible effort to protect a chair, on which she had piled up coats and cloaks, from the onward pushing of the crowd.

“Surely I know her,” cried Steiner, the moment he perceived Fauchery. “I’m certain I’ve seen her somewhere—at the casino, I imagine, and she got herself taken up there—she was so drunk.”

“As for me,” said the journalist, “I don’t quite know where it was. I am like you; I certainly have come across her.”

He lowered his voice and asked, laughing:

“At the Tricons’, perhaps.”

“Egad, it was in a dirty place,” Mignon declared. He seemed exasperated. “It’s disgusting that the public give such a reception to the first trollop that comes by. There’ll soon be no more decent women on the stage. Yes, I shall end by forbidding Rose to play.”

Fauchery could not restrain a smile. Meanwhile the downward shuffle of the heavy shoes on the steps did not cease, and a little man in a workman’s cap was heard crying in a drawling voice:

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