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NANA

by

Emile Zola

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

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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 be- comes 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-

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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

Nana

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; latecomers 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 accessions 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

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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 lighting 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