ÉMILE ZOLA

FOUR SHORT STORIES BY EMILE ZOLA

Эмиль Золя

Four Short Stories By Emile Zola

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Содержание

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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 laughter 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 aflare 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 topsy-turvy 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 furious 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 Vandeuvres," 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 Vandeuvres 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 paintings 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 Daguenet 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, spiteful 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 swaggering 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 Vandeuvres 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 flowing 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. Daguenet, 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:

"Oh my, she ain't no wopper! There's some pickings there!"

In the passage two young men, delicately curled and formally resplendent in turndown collars and the rest, were disputing together. One of them was repeating the words, "Beastly, beastly!" without stating any reasons; the other was replying with the words, "Stunning, stunning!" as though he, too, disdained all argument.

La Faloise declared her to be quite the thing; only he ventured to opine that she would be better still if she were to cultivate her voice. Steiner, who was no longer listening, seemed to awake with a start. Whatever happens, one must wait, he thought. Perhaps everything will be spoiled in the following acts. The public had shown complaisance, but it was certainly not yet taken by storm. Mignon swore that the piece would never finish, and when Fauchery and La Faloise left them in order to go up to the foyer he took Steiner's arm and, leaning hard against his shoulder, whispered in his ear:

"You're going to see my wife's costume for the second act, old fellow. It IS just blackguardly."

Upstairs in the foyer three glass chandeliers burned with a brilliant light. The two cousins hesitated an instant before entering, for the widely opened glazed doors afforded a view right through the gallery – a view of a surging sea of heads, which two currents, as it were, kept in a continuous eddying movement. But they entered after all. Five or six groups of men, talking very loudly and gesticulating, were obstinately discussing the play amid these violent interruptions; others were filing round, their heels, as they turned, sounding sharply on the waxed floor. To right and left, between columns of variegated imitation marble, women were sitting on benches covered with red velvet and viewing the passing movement of the crowd with an air of fatigue as though the heat had rendered them languid. In the lofty mirrors behind them one saw the reflection of their chignons. At the end of the room, in front of the bar, a man with a huge corporation was drinking a glass of fruit syrup.

But Fauchery, in order to breathe more freely, had gone to the balcony. La Faloise, who was studying the photographs of actresses hung in frames alternating with the mirrors between the columns, ended by following him. They had extinguished the line of gas jets on the facade of the theater, and it was dark and very cool on the balcony, which seemed to them unoccupied. Solitary and enveloped in shadow, a young man was standing, leaning his arms on the stone balustrade, in the recess to the right. He was smoking a cigarette, of which the burning end shone redly. Fauchery recognized Daguenet. They shook hands warmly.

"What are you after there, my dear fellow?" asked the journalist. "You're hiding yourself in holes and crannies – you, a man who never leaves the stalls on a first night!"

"But I'm smoking, you see," replied Daguenet.

Then Fauchery, to put him out of countenance:

"Well, well! What's your opinion of the new actress? She's being roughly handled enough in the passages."

"Bah!" muttered Daguenet. "They're people whom she'll have had nothing to do with!"

That was the sum of his criticism of Nana's talent. La Faloise leaned forward and looked down at the boulevard. Over against them the windows of a hotel and of a club were brightly lit up, while on the pavement below a dark mass of customers occupied the tables of the Cafe de Madrid. Despite the lateness of the hour the crowd were still crushing and being crushed; people were advancing with shortened step; a throng was constantly emerging from the Passage Jouffroy; individuals stood waiting five or six minutes before they could cross the roadway, to such a distance did the string of carriages extend.

"What a moving mass! And what a noise!" La Faloise kept reiterating, for Paris still astonished him.

The bell rang for some time; the foyer emptied. There was a hurrying of people in the passages. The curtain was already up when whole bands of spectators re-entered the house amid the irritated expressions of those who were once more in their places. Everyone took his seat again with an animated look and renewed attention. La Faloise directed his first glance in Gaga's direction, but he was dumfounded at seeing by her side the tall fair man who but recently had been in Lucy's stage box.

"What IS that man's name?" he asked.

Fauchery failed to observe him.

"Ah yes, it's Labordette," he said at last with the same careless movement. The scenery of the second act came as a surprise. It represented a suburban Shrove Tuesday dance at the Boule Noire.

Masqueraders were trolling a catch, the chorus of which was accompanied with a tapping of their heels. This 'Arryish departure, which nobody had in the least expected, caused so much amusement that the house encored the catch. And it was to this entertainment that the divine band, let astray by Iris, who falsely bragged that he knew the Earth well, were now come in order to proceed with their inquiry. They had put on disguises so as to preserve their incognito. Jupiter came on the stage as King Dagobert, with his breeches inside out and a huge tin crown on his head. Phoebus appeared as the Postillion of Lonjumeau and Minerva as a Norman nursemaid. Loud bursts of merriment greeted Mars, who wore an outrageous uniform, suggestive of an Alpine admiral. But the shouts of laughter became uproarious when Neptune came in view, clad in a blouse, a high, bulging workman's cap on his head, lovelocks glued to his temples. Shuffling along in slippers, he cried in a thick brogue.

"Well, I'm blessed! When ye're a masher it'll never do not to let 'em love yer!"

There were some shouts of "Oh! Oh!" while the ladies held their fans one degree higher. Lucy in her stage box laughed so obstreperously that Caroline Hequet silenced her with a tap of her fan.

From that moment forth the piece was saved – nay, more, promised a great success. This carnival of the gods, this dragging in the mud of their Olympus, this mock at a whole religion, a whole world of poetry, appeared in the light of a royal entertainment. The fever of irreverence gained the literary first-night world: legend was trampled underfoot; ancient images were shattered. Jupiter's make-up was capital. Mars was a success. Royalty became a farce and the army a thing of folly. When Jupiter, grown suddenly amorous of a little laundress, began to knock off a mad cancan, Simonne, who was playing the part of the laundress, launched a kick at the master of the immortals' nose and addressed him so drolly as "My big daddy!" that an immoderate fit of laughter shook the whole house. While they were dancing Phoebus treated Minerva to salad bowls of negus, and Neptune sat in state among seven or eight women who regaled him with cakes. Allusions were eagerly caught; indecent meanings were attached to them; harmless phrases were diverted from their proper significations in the light of exclamations issuing from the stalls. For a long time past the theatrical public had not wallowed in folly more irreverent. It rested them.

Nevertheless, the action of the piece advanced amid these fooleries. Vulcan, as an elegant young man clad, down to his gloves, entirely in yellow and with an eyeglass stuck in his eye, was forever running after Venus, who at last made her appearance as a fishwife, a kerchief on her head and her bosom, covered with big gold trinkets, in great evidence. Nana was so white and plump and looked so natural in a part demanding wide hips and a voluptuous mouth that she straightway won the whole house. On her account Rose Mignon was forgotten, though she was made up as a delicious baby, with a wicker-work burlet on her head and a short muslin frock and had just sighed forth Diana's plaints in a sweetly pretty voice. The other one, the big wench who slapped her thighs and clucked like a hen, shed round her an odor of life, a sovereign feminine charm, with which the public grew intoxicated. From the second act onward everything was permitted her. She might hold herself awkwardly; she might fail to sing some note in tune; she might forget her words – it mattered not: she had only to turn and laugh to raise shouts of applause. When she gave her famous kick from the hip the stalls were fired, and a glow of passion rose upward, upward, from gallery to gallery, till it reached the gods. It was a triumph, too, when she led the dance. She was at home in that: hand on hip, she enthroned Venus in the gutter by the pavement side. And the music seemed made for her plebeian voice – shrill, piping music, with reminiscences of Saint-Cloud Fair, wheezings of clarinets and playful trills on the part of the little flutes.

Two numbers were again encored. The opening waltz, that waltz with the naughty rhythmic beat, had returned and swept the gods with it. Juno, as a peasant woman, caught Jupiter and his little laundress cleverly and boxed his ears. Diana, surprising Venus in the act of making an assignation with Mars, made haste to indicate hour and place to Vulcan, who cried, "I've hit on a plan!" The rest of the act did not seem very clear. The inquiry ended in a final galop after which Jupiter,

breathless, streaming with perspiration and minus his crown, declared that the little women of Earth were delicious and that the men were all to blame.

The curtain was falling, when certain voices, rising above the storm of bravos, cried uproariously:

"All! All!"

Thereupon the curtain rose again; the artistes reappeared hand in hand. In the middle of the line Nana and Rose Mignon stood side by side, bowing and curtsying. The audience applauded; the clappers shouted acclamations. Then little by little the house emptied.

"I must go and pay my respects to the Countess Muffat," said La Faloise. "Exactly so; you'll present me," replied Fauchery; "we'll go down afterward."

But it was not easy to get to the first-tier boxes. In the passage at the top of the stairs there was a crush. In order to get forward at all among the various groups you had to make yourself small and to slide along, using your elbows in so doing. Leaning under a copper lamp, where a jet of gas was burning, the bulky critic was sitting in judgment on the piece in presence of an attentive circle. People in passing mentioned his name to each other in muttered tones. He had laughed the whole act through – that was the rumor going the round of the passages – nevertheless, he was now very severe and spoke of taste and morals. Farther off the thin-lipped critic was brimming over with a benevolence which had an unpleasant aftertaste, as of milk turned sour.

Fauchery glanced along, scrutinizing the boxes through the round openings in each door. But the Count de Vandeuvres stopped him with a question, and when he was informed that the two cousins were going to pay their respects to the Muffats, he pointed out to them box seven, from which he had just emerged. Then bending down and whispering in the journalist's ear:

"Tell me, my dear fellow," he said, "this Nana – surely she's the girl we saw one evening at the corner of the Rue de Provence?"

"By Jove, you're right!" cried Fauchery. "I was saying that I had come across her!"

La Faloise presented his cousin to Count Muffat de Beuville, who appeared very frigid. But on hearing the name Fauchery the countess raised her head and with a certain reserve complimented the paragraphist on his articles in the Figaro. Leaning on the velvet-covered support in front of her, she turned half round with a pretty movement of the shoulders. They talked for a short time, and the Universal Exhibition was mentioned.

"It will be very fine," said the count, whose square-cut, regular-featured face retained a certain gravity.

"I visited the Champ de Mars today and returned thence truly astonished."

"They say that things won't be ready in time," La Faloise ventured to remark. "There's infinite confusion there – "

But the count interrupted him in his severe voice:

"Things will be ready. The emperor desires it."

Fauchery gaily recounted how one day, when he had gone down thither in search of a subject for an article, he had come near spending all his time in the aquarium, which was then in course of construction. The countess smiled. Now and again she glanced down at the body of the house, raising an arm which a white glove covered to the elbow and fanning herself with languid hand. The house dozed, almost deserted. Some gentlemen in the stalls had opened out newspapers, and ladies received visits quite comfortably, as though they were at their own homes. Only a well-bred whispering was audible under the great chandelier, the light of which was softened in the fine cloud of dust raised by the confused movements of the interval. At the different entrances men were crowding in order to talk to ladies who remained seated. They stood there motionless for a few seconds, craning forward somewhat and displaying the great white bosoms of their shirt fronts.

"We count on you next Tuesday," said the countess to La Faloise, and she invited Fauchery, who bowed.

Not a word was said of the play; Nana's name was not once mentioned. The count was so glacially dignified that he might have been supposed to be taking part at a sitting of the legislature. In order to explain their presence that evening he remarked simply that his father-in-law was fond of the theater. The door of the box must have remained open, for the Marquis de Chouard, who had gone out in order to leave his seat to the visitors, was back again. He was straightening up his tall, old figure. His face looked soft and white under a broad-brimmed hat, and with his restless eyes he followed the movements of the women who passed.

The moment the countess had given her invitation Fauchery took his leave, feeling that to talk about the play would not be quite the thing. La Faloise was the last to quit the box. He had just noticed the fair-haired Labordette, comfortably installed in the Count de Vandeuvres's stage box and chatting at very close quarters with Blanche de Sivry.

"Gad," he said after rejoining his cousin, "that Labordette knows all the girls then! He's with Blanche now."

"Doubtless he knows them all," replied Fauchery quietly. "What d'you want to be taken for, my friend?"

The passage was somewhat cleared of people, and Fauchery was just about to go downstairs when Lucy Stewart called him. She was quite at the other end of the corridor, at the door of her stage box. They were getting cooked in there, she said, and she took up the whole corridor in company with Caroline Hequet and her mother, all three nibbling burnt almonds. A box opener was chatting maternally with them. Lucy fell out with the journalist. He was a pretty fellow; to be sure! He went up to see other women and didn't even come and ask if they were thirsty! Then, changing the subject:

"You know, dear boy, I think Nana very nice."

She wanted him to stay in the stage box for the last act, but he made his escape, promising to catch them at the door afterward. Downstairs in front of the theater Fauchery and La Faloise lit cigarettes. A great gathering blocked the sidewalk, a stream of men who had come down from the theater steps and were inhaling the fresh night air in the boulevards, where the roar and battle had diminished.

Meanwhile Mignon had drawn Steiner away to the Cafe des Varietes. Seeing Nana's success, he had set to work to talk enthusiastically about her, all the while observing the banker out of the corners of his eyes. He knew him well; twice he had helped him to deceive Rose and then, the caprice being over, had brought him back to her, faithful and repentant. In the cafe the too numerous crowd of customers were squeezing themselves round the marble-topped tables. Several were standing up, drinking in a great hurry. The tall mirrors reflected this thronging world of heads to infinity and magnified the narrow room beyond measure with its three chandeliers, its moleskin-covered seats and its winding staircase draped with red. Steiner went and seated himself at a table in the first saloon, which opened full on the boulevard, its doors having been removed rather early for the time of year. As Fauchery and La Faloise were passing the banker stopped them.

"Come and take a bock with us, eh?" they said.

But he was too preoccupied by an idea; he wanted to have a bouquet thrown to Nana. At last he called a waiter belonging to the cafe, whom he familiarly addressed as Auguste. Mignon, who was listening, looked at him so sharply that he lost countenance and stammered out:

"Two bouquets, Auguste, and deliver them to the attendant. A bouquet for each of these ladies! Happy thought, eh?"

At the other end of the saloon, her shoulders resting against the frame of a mirror, a girl, some eighteen years of age at the outside, was leaning motionless in front of her empty glass as though she had been benumbed by long and fruitless waiting. Under the natural curls of her beautiful gray-gold hair a virginal face looked out at you with velvety eyes, which were at once soft and candid.

She wore a dress of faded green silk and a round hat which blows had dinted. The cool air of the night made her look very pale.

"Egad, there's Satin," murmured Fauchery when his eye lit upon her.

La Faloise questioned him. Oh dear, yes, she was a streetwalker – she didn't count. But she was such a scandalous sort that people amused themselves by making her talk. And the journalist, raising his voice:

"What are you doing there, Satin?"

"I'm bogging," replied Satin quietly without changing position.

The four men were charmed and fell a-laughing. Mignon assured them that there was no need to hurry; it would take twenty minutes to set up the scenery for the third act. But the two cousins, having drunk their beer, wanted to go up into the theater again; the cold was making itself felt. Then Mignon remained alone with Steiner, put his elbows on the table and spoke to him at close quarters.

"It's an understood thing, eh? We are to go to her house, and I'm to introduce you. You know the thing's quite between ourselves – my wife needn't know."

Once more in their places, Fauchery and La Faloise noticed a pretty, quietly dressed woman in the second tier of boxes. She was with a serious-looking gentleman, a chief clerk at the office of the Ministry of the Interior, whom La Faloise knew, having met him at the Muffats'. As to Fauchery, he was under the impression that her name was Madame Robert, a lady of honorable repute who had a lover, only one, and that always a person of respectability.

But they had to turn round, for Daguenet was smiling at them. Now that Nana had had a success he no longer hid himself: indeed, he had just been scoring triumphs in the passages. By his side was the young truant schoolboy, who had not quitted his seat, so stupefying was the state of admiration into which Nana had plunged him. That was it, he thought; that was the woman! And he blushed as he thought so and dragged his gloves on and off mechanically. Then since his neighbor had spoken of Nana, he ventured to question him.

"Will you pardon me for asking you, sir, but that lady who is acting – do you know her?"

"Yes, I do a little," murmured Daguenet with some surprise and hesitation.

"Then you know her address?"

The question, addressed as it was to him, came so abruptly that he felt inclined to respond with a box on the ear.

"No," he said in a dry tone of voice.

And with that he turned his back. The fair lad knew that he had just been guilty of some breach of good manners. He blushed more hotly than ever and looked scared.

The traditional three knocks were given, and among the returning throng, attendants, laden with pelisses and overcoats, bustled about at a great rate in order to put away people's things. The clappers applauded the scenery, which represented a grotto on Mount Etna, hollowed out in a silver mine and with sides glittering like new money. In the background Vulcan's forge glowed like a setting star. Diana, since the second act, had come to a good understanding with the god, who was to pretend that he was on a journey, so as to leave the way clear for Venus and Mars. Then scarcely was Diana alone than Venus made her appearance. A shiver of delight ran round the house. Nana was nude. With quiet audacity she appeared in her nakedness, certain of the sovereign power of her flesh. Some gauze enveloped her, but her rounded shoulders, her Amazonian bosom, her wide hips, which swayed to and fro voluptuously, her whole body, in fact, could be divined, nay discerned, in all its foamlike whiteness of tint beneath the slight fabric she wore. It was Venus rising from the waves with no veil save her tresses. And when Nana lifted her arms the golden hairs in her armpits were observable in the glare of the footlights. There was no applause. Nobody laughed any more. The men strained forward with serious faces, sharp features, mouths irritated and parched. A wind seemed to have passed, a soft, soft wind, laden with a secret menace. Suddenly in the bouncing child the woman stood discovered, a woman full of restless suggestion, who brought with her the delirium of sex and opened the gates of the unknown world of desire. Nana was smiling still, but her smile was now bitter, as of a devourer of men.

"By God," said Fauchery quite simply to La Faloise.

Mars in the meantime, with his plume of feathers, came hurrying to the trysting place and found himself between the two goddesses. Then ensued a passage which Prulliere played with great delicacy. Petted by Diana, who wanted to make a final attack upon his feelings before delivering him up to Vulcan, wheedled by Venus, whom the presence of her rival excited, he gave himself up to these tender delights with the beatified expression of a man in clover. Finally a grand trio brought the scene to a close, and it was then that an attendant appeared in Lucy Stewart's box and threw on the stage two immense bouquets of white lilacs. There was applause; Nana and Rose Mignon bowed, while Prulliere picked up the bouquets. Many of the occupants of the stalls turned smilingly toward the ground-floor occupied by Steiner and Mignon. The banker, his face blood-red, was suffering from little convulsive twitchings of the chin, as though he had a stoppage in his throat.

What followed took the house by storm completely. Diana had gone off in a rage, and directly afterward, Venus, sitting on a moss-clad seat, called Mars to her. Never yet had a more glowing scene of seduction been ventured on. Nana, her arms round Prulliere's neck, was drawing him toward her when Fontan, with comically furious mimicry and an exaggerated imitation of the face of an outraged husband who surprises his wife in FLAGRANTE DELICTO, appeared at the back of the grotto. He was holding the famous net with iron meshes. For an instant he poised and swung it, as a fisherman does when he is going to make a cast, and by an ingenious twist Venus and Mars were caught in the snare; the net wrapped itself round them and held them motionless in the attitude of happy lovers.

A murmur of applause swelled and swelled like a growing sigh. There was some hand clapping, and every opera glass was fixed on Venus. Little by little Nana had taken possession of the public, and now every man was her slave.

A wave of lust had flowed from her as from an excited animal, and its influence had spread and spread and spread till the whole house was possessed by it. At that moment her slightest movement blew the flame of desire: with her little finger she ruled men's flesh. Backs were arched and quivered as though unseen violin bows had been drawn across their muscles; upon men's shoulders appeared fugitive hairs, which flew in air, blown by warm and wandering breaths, breathed one knew not from what feminine mouth. In front of him Fauchery saw the truant schoolboy half lifted from his seat by passion. Curiosity led him to look at the Count de Vandeuvres – he was extremely pale, and his lips looked pinched – at fat Steiner, whose face was purple to the verge of apoplexy; at Labordette, ogling away with the highly astonished air of a horse dealer admiring a perfectly shaped mare; at Daguenet, whose ears were blood-red and twitching with enjoyment. Then a sudden idea made him glance behind, and he marveled at what he saw in the Muffats' box. Behind the countess, who was white and serious as usual, the count was sitting straight upright, with mouth agape and face mottled with red, while close by him, in the shadow, the restless eyes of the Marquis de Chouard had become catlike phosphorescent, full of golden sparkles. The house was suffocating; people's very hair grew heavy on their perspiring heads. For three hours back the breath of the multitude had filled and heated the atmosphere with a scent of crowded humanity. Under the swaying glare of the gas the dust clouds in mid-air had grown constantly denser as they hung motionless beneath the chandelier. The whole house seemed to be oscillating, to be lapsing toward dizziness in its fatigue and excitement, full, as it was, of those drowsy midnight desires which flutter in the recesses of the bed of passion. And Nana, in front of this languorous public, these fifteen hundred human beings thronged and smothered in the exhaustion and nervous exasperation which belong to the close of a spectacle, Nana still triumphed by right of her marble flesh and that sexual nature of hers, which was strong enough to destroy the whole crowd of her adorers and yet sustain no injury.

The piece drew to a close. In answer to Vulcan's triumphant summons all the Olympians defiled before the lovers with ohs and ahs of stupefaction and gaiety. Jupiter said, "I think it is light conduct on your part, my son, to summon us to see such a sight as this." Then a reaction took place in favor of Venus. The chorus of cuckolds was again ushered in by Iris and besought the master of the gods not to

give effect to its petition, for since women had lived at home, domestic life was becoming impossible for the men: the latter preferred being deceived and happy. That was the moral of the play. Then Venus was set at liberty, and Vulcan obtained a partial divorce from her. Mars was reconciled with Diana, and Jove, for the sake of domestic peace, packed his little laundress off into a constellation. And finally they extricated Love from his black hole, where instead of conjugating the verb AMO he had been busy in the manufacture of "dollies." The curtain fell on an apotheosis, wherein the cuckolds' chorus knelt and sang a hymn of gratitude to Venus, who stood there with smiling lips, her stature enhanced by her sovereign nudity.

The audience, already on their feet, were making for the exits. The authors were mentioned, and amid a thunder of applause there were two calls before the curtain. The shout of "Nana! Nana!" rang wildly forth. Then no sooner was the house empty than it grew dark: the footlights went out; the chandelier was turned down; long strips of gray canvas slipped from the stage boxes and swathed the gilt ornamentation of the galleries, and the house, lately so full of heat and noise, lapsed suddenly into a heavy sleep, while a musty, dusty odor began to pervade it. In the front of her box stood the Countess Muffat. Very erect and closely wrapped up in her furs, she stared at the gathering shadows and waited for the crowd to pass away.

In the passages the people were jostling the attendants, who hardly knew what to do among the tumbled heaps of outdoor raiment. Fauchery and La Faloise had hurried in order to see the crowd pass out. All along the entrance hall men formed a living hedge, while down the double staircase came slowly and in regular, complete formation two interminable throngs of human beings. Steiner, in tow of Mignon, had left the house among the foremost. The Count de Vandeuvres took his departure with Blanche de Sivry on his arm. For a moment or two Gaga and her daughter seemed doubtful how to proceed, but Labordette made haste to go and fetch them a conveyance, the door whereof he gallantly shut after them. Nobody saw Daguenet go by. As the truant schoolboy, registering a mental vow to wait at the stage door, was running with burning cheeks toward the Passage des Panoramas, of which he found the gate closed, Satin, standing on the edge of the pavement, moved forward and brushed him with her skirts, but he in his despair gave her a savage refusal and vanished amid the crowd, tears of impotent desire in his eyes. Members of the audience were lighting their cigars and walking off, humming:

When Venus roams at eventide.

Satin had gone back in front of the Cafe des Varietes, where Auguste let her eat the sugar that remained over from the customers' orders. A stout man, who came out in a very heated condition, finally carried her off in the shadow of the boulevard, which was now gradually going to sleep.

Still people kept coming downstairs. La Faloise was waiting for Clarisse; Fauchery had promised to catch up Lucy Stewart with Caroline Hequet and her mother. They came; they took up a whole corner of the entrance hall and were laughing very loudly when the Muffats passed by them with an icy expression. Bordenave had just then opened a little door and, peeping out, had obtained from Fauchery the formal promise of an article. He was dripping with perspiration, his face blazed, as though he were drunk with success.

"You're good for two hundred nights," La Faloise said to him with civility. "The whole of Paris will visit your theater."

But Bordenave grew annoyed and, indicating with a jerk of his chin the public who filled the entrance hall – a herd of men with parched lips and ardent eyes, still burning with the enjoyment of Nana – he cried out violently:

"Say 'my brothel,' you obstinate devil!"

CHAPTER II

At ten o'clock the next morning Nana was still asleep. She occupied the second floor of a large new house in the Boulevard Haussmann, the landlord of which let flats to single ladies in order by their means to dry the paint. A rich merchant from Moscow, who had come to pass a winter in Paris, had installed her there after paying six months' rent in advance. The rooms were too big for her and had never been completely furnished. The vulgar sumptuosity of gilded consoles and gilded chairs formed a crude contrast therein to the bric-a-brac of a secondhand furniture shop – to mahogany round tables, that is to say, and zinc candelabras, which sought to imitate Florentine bronze. All of which smacked of the courtesan too early deserted by her first serious protector and fallen back on shabby lovers, of a precarious first appearance of a bad start, handicapped by refusals of credit and threats of eviction.

Nana was sleeping on her face, hugging in her bare arms a pillow in which she was burying cheeks grown pale in sleep. The bedroom and the dressing room were the only two apartments which had been properly furnished by a neighboring upholsterer. A ray of light, gliding in under a curtain, rendered visible rosewood furniture and hangings and chairbacks of figured damask with a pattern of big blue flowers on a gray ground. But in the soft atmosphere of that slumbering chamber Nana suddenly awoke with a start, as though surprised to find an empty place at her side. She looked at the other pillow lying next to hers; there was the dint of a human head among its flounces: it was still warm. And groping with one hand, she pressed the knob of an electric bell by her bed's head.

"He's gone then?" she asked the maid who presented herself.

"Yes, madame, Monsieur Paul went away not ten minutes back. As Madame was tired, he did not wish to wake her. But he ordered me to tell Madame that he would come tomorrow."

As she spoke Zoe, the lady's maid, opened the outer shutter. A flood of daylight entered. Zoe, a dark brunette with hair in little plaits, had a long canine face, at once livid and full of seams, a snub nose, thick lips and two black eyes in continual movement.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," repeated Nana, who was not yet wide awake, "is tomorrow the day?"

"Yes, madame, Monsieur Paul has always come on the Wednesday."

"No, now I remember," said the young woman, sitting up. "It's all changed. I wanted to tell him so this morning. He would run against the nigger! We should have a nice to-do!"

"Madame did not warn me; I couldn't be aware of it," murmured Zoe. "When Madame changes her days she will do well to tell me so that I may know. Then the old miser is no longer due on the Tuesday?"

Between themselves they were wont thus gravely to nickname as "old miser" and "nigger" their two paying visitors, one of whom was a tradesman of economical tendencies from the Faubourg Saint-Denis, while the other was a Walachian, a mock count, whose money, paid always at the most irregular intervals, never looked as though it had been honestly come by. Daguenet had made Nana give him the days subsequent to the old miser's visits, and as the trader had to be at home by eight o'clock in the morning, the young man would watch for his departure from Zoes kitchen and would take his place, which was still quite warm, till ten o'clock. Then he, too, would go about his business. Nana and he were wont to think it a very comfortable arrangement.

"So much the worse," said Nana; "I'll write to him this afternoon. And if he doesn't receive my letter, then tomorrow you will stop him coming in."

In the meantime Zoe was walking softly about the room. She spoke of yesterday's great hit. Madame had shown such talent; she sang so well! Ah! Madame need not fret at all now!

Nana, her elbow dug into her pillow, only tossed her head in reply. Her nightdress had slipped down on her shoulders, and her hair, unfastened and entangled, flowed over them in masses.

"Without doubt," she murmured, becoming thoughtful; "but what's to be done to gain time? I'm going to have all sorts of bothers today. Now let's see, has the porter come upstairs yet this morning?"

Then both the women talked together seriously. Nana owed three quarters' rent; the landlord was talking of seizing the furniture. Then, too, there was a perfect downpour of creditors; there was a livery-stable man, a needlewoman, a ladies' tailor, a charcoal dealer and others besides, who came every day and settled themselves on a bench in the little hall. The charcoal dealer especially was a dreadful fellow – he shouted on the staircase. But Nana's greatest cause of distress was her little Louis, a child she had given birth to when she was sixteen and now left in charge of a nurse in a village in the neighborhood of Rambouillet. This woman was clamoring for the sum of three hundred francs before she would consent to give the little Louis back to her. Nana, since her last visit to the child, had been seized with a fit of maternal love and was desperate at the thought that she could not realize a project, which had now become a hobby with her. This was to pay off the nurse and to place the little man with his aunt, Mme Lerat, at the Batignolles, whither she could go and see him as often as she liked.

Meanwhile the lady's maid kept hinting that her mistress ought to have confided her necessities to the old miser.

"To be sure, I told him everything," cried Nana, "and he told me in answer that he had too many big liabilities. He won't go beyond his thousand francs a month. The nigger's beggared just at present; I expect he's lost at play. As to that poor Mimi, he stands in great need of a loan himself; a fall in stocks has cleaned him out – he can't even bring me flowers now."

She was speaking of Daguenet. In the self-abandonment of her awakening she had no secrets from Zoe, and the latter, inured to such confidences, received them with respectful sympathy. Since Madame condescended to speak to her of her affairs she would permit herself to say what she thought. Besides, she was very fond of Madame; she had left Mme Blanche for the express purpose of taking service with her, and heaven knew Mme Blanche was straining every nerve to have her again! Situations weren't lacking; she was pretty well known, but she would have stayed with Madame even in narrow circumstances, because she believed in Madame's future. And she concluded by stating her advice with precision. When one was young one often did silly things. But this time it was one's duty to look alive, for the men only thought of having their fun. Oh dear, yes! Things would right themselves. Madame had only to say one word in order to quiet her creditors and find the money she stood in need of.

"All that doesn't help me to three hundred francs," Nana kept repeating as she plunged her fingers into the vagrant convolutions of her back hair. "I must have three hundred francs today, at once! It's stupid not to know anyone who'll give you three hundred francs."

She racked her brains. She would have sent Mme Lerat, whom she was expecting that very morning, to Rambouillet. The counteraction of her sudden fancy spoiled for her the triumph of last night. Among all those men who had cheered her, to think that there wasn't one to bring her fifteen louis! And then one couldn't accept money in that way! Dear heaven, how unfortunate she was! And she kept harking back again to the subject of her baby – he had blue eyes like a cherub's; he could lisp "Mamma" in such a funny voice that you were ready to die of laughing!

But at this moment the electric bell at the outer door was heard to ring with its quick and tremulous vibration. Zoe returned, murmuring with a confidential air:

"It's a woman."

She had seen this woman a score of times, only she made believe never to recognize her and to be quite ignorant of the nature of her relations with ladies in difficulties.

"She has told me her name – Madame Tricon."

"The Tricon," cried Nana. "Dear me! That's true. I'd forgotten her. Show her in."

Zoe ushered in a tall old lady who wore ringlets and looked like a countess who haunts lawyers' offices. Then she effaced herself, disappearing noiselessly with the lithe, serpentine movement

wherewith she was wont to withdraw from a room on the arrival of a gentleman. However, she might have stayed. The Tricon did not even sit down. Only a brief exchange of words took place.

"I have someone for you today. Do you care about it?"

"Yes. How much?"

"Twenty louis."

"At what o'clock?"

"At three. It's settled then?"

"It's settled."

Straightway the Tricon talked of the state of the weather. It was dry weather, pleasant for walking. She had still four or five persons to see. And she took her departure after consulting a small memorandum book. When she was once more alone Nana appeared comforted. A slight shiver agitated her shoulders, and she wrapped herself softly up again in her warm bedclothes with the lazy movements of a cat who is susceptible to cold. Little by little her eyes closed, and she lay smiling at the thought of dressing Louiset prettily on the following day, while in the slumber into which she once more sank last night's long, feverish dream of endlessly rolling applause returned like a sustained accompaniment to music and gently soothed her lassitude.

At eleven o'clock, when Zoe showed Mme Lerat into the room, Nana was still asleep. But she woke at the noise and cried out at once:

"It's you. You'll go to Rambouillet today?"

"That's what I've come for," said the aunt. "There's a train at twenty past twelve. I've got time to catch it."

"No, I shall only have the money by and by," replied the young woman, stretching herself and throwing out her bosom. "You'll have lunch, and then we'll see."

Zoe brought a dressing jacket.

"The hairdresser's here, madame," she murmured.

But Nana did not wish to go into the dressing room. And she herself cried out:

"Come in, Francis."

A well-dressed man pushed open the door and bowed. Just at that moment Nana was getting out of bed, her bare legs in full view. But she did not hurry and stretched her hands out so as to let Zoe draw on the sleeves of the dressing jacket. Francis, on his part, was quite at his ease and without turning away waited with a sober expression on his face.

"Perhaps Madame has not seen the papers. There's a very nice article in the Figaro."

He had brought the journal. Mme Lerat put on her spectacles and read the article aloud, standing in front of the window as she did so. She had the build of a policeman, and she drew herself up to her full height, while her nostrils seemed to compress themselves whenever she uttered a gallant epithet. It was a notice by Fauchery, written just after the performance, and it consisted of a couple of very glowing columns, full of witty sarcasm about the artist and of broad admiration for the woman.

"Excellent!" Francis kept repeating.

Nana laughed good-humoredly at his chaffing her about her voice! He was a nice fellow, was that Fauchery, and she would repay him for his charming style of writing. Mme Lerat, after having reread the notice, roundly declared that the men all had the devil in their shanks, and she refused to explain her self further, being fully satisfied with a brisk allusion of which she alone knew the meaning. Francis finished turning up and fastening Nana's hair. He bowed and said:

"I'll keep my eye on the evening papers. At half-past five as usual, eh?"

"Bring me a pot of pomade and a pound of burnt almonds from Boissier's," Nana cried to him across the drawing room just as he was shutting the door after him.

Then the two women, once more alone, recollected that they had not embraced, and they planted big kisses on each other's cheeks. The notice warmed their hearts. Nana, who up till now had been half asleep, was again seized with the fever of her triumph. Dear, dear, 'twas Rose Mignon that would

be spending a pleasant morning! Her aunt having been unwilling to go to the theater because, as she averred, sudden emotions ruined her stomach, Nana set herself to describe the events of the evening and grew intoxicated at her own recital, as though all Paris had been shaken to the ground by the applause. Then suddenly interrupting herself, she asked with a laugh if one would ever have imagined it all when she used to go traipsing about the Rue de la Goutte-d'Or. Mme Lerat shook her head. No, no, one never could have foreseen it! And she began talking in her turn, assuming a serious air as she did so and calling Nana "daughter." Wasn't she a second mother to her since the first had gone to rejoin Papa and Grandmamma? Nana was greatly softened and on the verge of tears. But Mme Lerat declared that the past was the past – oh yes, to be sure, a dirty past with things in it which it was as well not to stir up every day. She had left off seeing her niece for a long time because among the family she was accused of ruining herself along with the little thing. Good God, as though that were possible! She didn't ask for confidences; she believed that Nana had always lived decently, and now it was enough for her to have found her again in a fine position and to observe her kind feelings toward her son. Virtue and hard work were still the only things worth anything in this world.

"Who is the baby's father?" she said, interrupting herself, her eyes lit up with an expression of acute curiosity.

Nana was taken by surprise and hesitated a moment.

"A gentleman," she replied.

"There now!" rejoined the aunt. "They declared that you had him by a stonemason who was in the habit of beating you. Indeed, you shall tell me all about it someday; you know I'm discreet! Tut, tut, I'll look after him as though he were a prince's son."

She had retired from business as a florist and was living on her savings, which she had got together sou by sou, till now they brought her in an income of six hundred francs a year. Nana promised to rent some pretty little lodgings for her and to give her a hundred francs a month besides. At the mention of this sum the aunt forgot herself and shrieked to her niece, bidding her squeeze their throats, since she had them in her grasp. She was meaning the men, of course. Then they both embraced again, but in the midst of her rejoicing Nana's face, as she led the talk back to the subject of Louiset, seemed to be overshadowed by a sudden recollection.

"Isn't it a bore I've got to go out at three o'clock?" she muttered. "It IS a nuisance!"

Just then Zoe came in to say that lunch was on the table. They went into the dining room, where an old lady was already seated at table. She had not taken her hat off, and she wore a dark dress of an indecisive color midway between puce and goose dripping. Nana did not seem surprised at sight of her. She simply asked her why she hadn't come into the bedroom.

"I heard voices," replied the old lady. "I thought you had company."

Mme Maloir, a respectable-looking and mannerly woman, was Nana's old friend, chaperon and companion. Mme Lerat's presence seemed to fidget her at first. Afterward, when she became aware that it was Nana's aunt, she looked at her with a sweet expression and a die-away smile. In the meantime Nana, who averred that she was as hungry as a wolf, threw herself on the radishes and gobbled them up without bread. Mme Lerat had become ceremonious; she refused the radishes as provocative of phlegm. By and by when Zoe had brought in the cutlets Nana just chipped the meat and contented herself with sucking the bones. Now and again she scrutinized her old friend's hat out of the corners of her eyes.

"It's the new hat I gave you?" she ended by saying.

"Yes, I made it up," murmured Mme Maloir, her mouth full of meat.

The hat was smart to distraction. In front it was greatly exaggerated, and it was adorned with a lofty feather. Mme Maloir had a mania for doing up all her hats afresh; she alone knew what really became her, and with a few stitches she could manufacture a toque out of the most elegant headgear. Nana, who had bought her this very hat in order not to be ashamed of her when in her company out of doors, was very near being vexed.

"Push it up, at any rate," she cried.

"No, thank you," replied the old lady with dignity. "It doesn't get in my way; I can eat very comfortably as it is."

After the cutlets came cauliflowers and the remains of a cold chicken. But at the arrival of each successive dish Nana made a little face, hesitated, sniffed and left her plateful untouched. She finished her lunch with the help of preserve.

Dessert took a long time. Zoe did not remove the cloth before serving the coffee. Indeed, the ladies simply pushed back their plates before taking it. They talked continually of yesterday's charming evening. Nana kept rolling cigarettes, which she smoked, swinging up and down on her backward-tilted chair. And as Zoe had remained behind and was lounging idly against the sideboard, it came about that the company were favored with her history. She said she was the daughter of a midwife at Bercy who had failed in business. First of all she had taken service with a dentist and after that with an insurance agent, but neither place suited her, and she thereupon enumerated, not without a certain amount of pride, the names of the ladies with whom she had served as lady's maid. Zoe spoke of these ladies as one who had had the making of their fortunes. It was very certain that without her more than one would have had some queer tales to tell. Thus one day, when Mme Blanche was with M. Octave, in came the old gentleman. What did Zoe do? She made believe to tumble as she crossed the drawing room; the old boy rushed up to her assistance, flew to the kitchen to fetch her a glass of water, and M. Octave slipped away.

"Oh, she's a good girl, you bet!" said Nana, who was listening to her with tender interest and a sort of submissive admiration.

"Now I've had my troubles," began Mme Lerat. And edging up to Mme Maloir, she imparted to her certain confidential confessions. Both ladies took lumps of sugar dipped in cognac and sucked them. But Mme Maloir was wont to listen to other people's secrets without even confessing anything concerning herself. People said that she lived on a mysterious allowance in a room whither no one ever penetrated.

All of a sudden Nana grew excited.

"Don't play with the knives, Aunt. You know it gives me a turn!"

Without thinking about it Mme Lerat had crossed two knives on the table in front of her. Notwithstanding this, the young woman defended herself from the charge of superstition. Thus, if the salt were upset, it meant nothing, even on a Friday; but when it came to knives, that was too much of a good thing; that had never proved fallacious. There could be no doubt that something unpleasant was going to happen to her. She yawned, and then with an air, of profound boredom:

"Two o'clock already. I must go out. What a nuisance!"

The two old ladies looked at one another. The three women shook their heads without speaking. To be sure, life was not always amusing. Nana had tilted her chair back anew and lit a cigarette, while the others sat pursing up their lips discreetly, thinking deeply philosophic thoughts.

"While waiting for you to return we'll play a game of bezique," said Mme Maloir after a short silence. "Does Madame play bezique?"

Certainly Mme Lerat played it, and that to perfection. It was no good troubling Zoe, who had vanished – a corner of the table would do quite well. And they pushed back the tablecloth over the dirty plates. But as Mme Maloir was herself going to take the cards out of a drawer in the sideboard, Nana remarked that before she sat down to her game it would be very nice of her if she would write her a letter. It bored Nana to write letters; besides, she was not sure of her spelling, while her old friend could turn out the most feeling epistles. She ran to fetch some good note paper in her bedroom. An inkstand consisting of a bottle of ink worth about three sous stood untidily on one of the pieces of furniture, with a pen deep in rust beside it. The letter was for Daguenet. Mme Maloir herself wrote in her bold English hand, "My darling little man," and then she told him not to come tomorrow because

"that could not be" but hastened to add that "she was with him in thought at every moment of the day, whether she were near or far away."

"And I end with 'a thousand kisses,'" she murmured.

Mme Lerat had shown her approval of each phrase with an emphatic nod. Her eyes were sparkling; she loved to find herself in the midst of love affairs. Nay, she was seized with a desire to add some words of her own and, assuming a tender look and cooing like a dove, she suggested:

"A thousand kisses on thy beautiful eyes."

"That's the thing: 'a thousand kisses on thy beautiful eyes'!" Nana repeated, while the two old ladies assumed a beatified expression.

Zoe was rung for and told to take the letter down to a commissionaire. She had just been talking with the theater messenger, who had brought her mistress the day's playbill and rehearsal arrangements, which he had forgotten in the morning. Nana had this individual ushered in and got him to take the latter to Daguenet on his return. Then she put questions to him. Oh yes! M. Bordenave was very pleased; people had already taken seats for a week to come; Madame had no idea of the number of people who had been asking her address since morning. When the man had taken his departure Nana announced that at most she would only be out half an hour. If there were any visitors Zoe would make them wait. As she spoke the electric bell sounded. It was a creditor in the shape of the man of whom she jobbed her carriages. He had settled himself on the bench in the anteroom, and the fellow was free to twiddle his thumbs till night – there wasn't the least hurry now.

"Come, buck up!" said Nana, still torpid with laziness and yawning and stretching afresh. "I ought to be there now!"

Yet she did not budge but kept watching the play of her aunt, who had just announced four aces. Chin on hand, she grew quite engrossed in it but gave a violent start on hearing three o'clock strike.

"Good God!" she cried roughly.

Then Mme Maloir, who was counting the tricks she had won with her tens and aces, said cheeringly to her in her soft voice:

"It would be better, dearie, to give up your expedition at once."

"No, be quick about it," said Mme Lerat, shuffling the cards. "I shall take the half-past four o'clock train if you're back here with the money before four o'clock."

"Oh, there'll be no time lost," she murmured.

Ten minutes after Zoe helped her on with a dress and a hat. It didn't matter much if she were badly turned out. Just as she was about to go downstairs there was a new ring at the bell. This time it was the charcoal dealer. Very well, he might keep the livery-stable keeper company – it would amuse the fellows. Only, as she dreaded a scene, she crossed the kitchen and made her escape by the back stairs. She often went that way and in return had only to lift up her flounces.

"When one is a good mother anything's excusable," said Mme Maloir sententiously when left alone with Mme Lerat.

"Four kings," replied this lady, whom the play greatly excited.

And they both plunged into an interminable game.

The table had not been cleared. The smell of lunch and the cigarette smoke filled the room with an ambient, steamy vapor. The two ladies had again set to work dipping lumps of sugar in brandy and sucking the same. For twenty minutes at least they played and sucked simultaneously when, the electric bell having rung a third time, Zoe bustled into the room and roughly disturbed them, just as if they had been her own friends.

"Look here, that's another ring. You can't stay where you are. If many folks call I must have the whole flat. Now off you go, off you go!"

Mme Maloir was for finishing the game, but Zoe looked as if she was going to pounce down on the cards, and so she decided to carry them off without in any way altering their positions, while Mme Lerat undertook the removal of the brandy bottle, the glasses and the sugar. Then they both

scudded to the kitchen, where they installed themselves at the table in an empty space between the dishcloths, which were spread out to dry, and the bowl still full of dishwater.

"We said it was three hundred and forty. It's your turn."

"I play hearts."

When Zoe returned she found them once again absorbed. After a silence, as Mme Lerat was shuffling, Mme Maloir asked who it was.

"Oh, nobody to speak of," replied the servant carelessly; "a slip of a lad! I wanted to send him away again, but he's such a pretty boy with never a hair on his chin and blue eyes and a girl's face! So I told him to wait after all. He's got an enormous bouquet in his hand, which he never once consented to put down. One would like to catch him one – a brat like that who ought to be at school still!"

Mme Lerat went to fetch a water bottle to mix herself some brandy and water, the lumps of sugar having rendered her thirsty. Zoe muttered something to the effect that she really didn't mind if she drank something too. Her mouth, she averred, was as bitter as gall.

"So you put him – ?" continued Mme Maloir.

"Oh yes, I put him in the closet at the end of the room, the little unfurnished one. There's only one of my lady's trunks there and a table. It's there I stow the lubbers."

And she was putting plenty of sugar in her grog when the electric bell made her jump. Oh, drat it all! Wouldn't they let her have a drink in peace? If they were to have a peal of bells things promised well. Nevertheless, she ran off to open the door. Returning presently, she saw Mme Maloir questioning her with a glance.

"It's nothing," she said, "only a bouquet."

All three refreshed themselves, nodding to each other in token of salutation. Then while Zoe was at length busy clearing the table, bringing the plates out one by one and putting them in the sink, two other rings followed close upon one another. But they weren't serious, for while keeping the kitchen informed of what was going on she twice repeated her disdainful expression:

"Nothing, only a bouquet."

Notwithstanding which, the old ladies laughed between two of their tricks when they heard her describe the looks of the creditors in the anteroom after the flowers had arrived. Madame would find her bouquets on her toilet table. What a pity it was they cost such a lot and that you could only get ten sous for them! Oh dear, yes, plenty of money was wasted!

"For my part," said Mme Maloir, "I should be quite content if every day of my life I got what the men in Paris had spent on flowers for the women."

"Now, you know, you're not hard to please," murmured Mme Lerat. "Why, one would have only just enough to buy thread with. Four queens, my dear."

It was ten minutes to four. Zoe was astonished, could not understand why her mistress was out so long. Ordinarily when Madame found herself obliged to go out in the afternoons she got it over in double-quick time. But Mme Maloir declared that one didn't always manage things as one wished. Truly, life was beset with obstacles, averred Mme Lerat. The best course was to wait. If her niece was long in coming it was because her occupations detained her; wasn't it so? Besides, they weren't overworked – it was comfortable in the kitchen. And as hearts were out, Mme Lerat threw down diamonds.

The bell began again, and when Zoe reappeared she was burning with excitement.

"My children, it's fat Steiner!" she said in the doorway, lowering her voice as she spoke. "I've put HIM in the little sitting room."

Thereupon Mme Maloir spoke about the banker to Mme Lerat, who knew no such gentleman. Was he getting ready to give Rose Mignon the go-by? Zoe shook her head; she knew a thing or two. But once more she had to go and open the door.

"Here's bothers!" she murmured when she came back. "It's the nigger! 'Twasn't any good telling him that my lady's gone out, and so he's settled himself in the bedroom. We only expected him this evening."

At a quarter past four Nana was not in yet. What could she be after? It was silly of her! Two other bouquets were brought round, and Zoe, growing bored looked to see if there were any coffee left. Yes, the ladies would willingly finish off the coffee; it would waken them up. Sitting hunched up on their chairs, they were beginning to fall asleep through dint of constantly taking their cards between their fingers with the accustomed movement. The half-hour sounded. Something must decidedly have happened to Madame. And they began whispering to each other.

Suddenly Mme Maloir forgot herself and in a ringing voice announced: "I've the five hundred! Trumps, Major Quint!"

"Oh, do be quiet!" said Zoe angrily. "What will all those gentlemen think?" And in the silence which ensued and amid the whispered muttering of the two old women at strife over their game, the sound of rapid footsteps ascended from the back stairs. It was Nana at last. Before she had opened the door her breathlessness became audible. She bounced abruptly in, looking very red in the face. Her skirt, the string of which must have been broken, was trailing over the stairs, and her flounces had just been dipped in a puddle of something unpleasant which had oozed out on the landing of the first floor, where the servant girl was a regular slut.

"Here you are! It's lucky!" said Mme Lerat, pursing up her lips, for she was still vexed at Mme Maloir's "five hundred." "You may flatter yourself at the way you keep folks waiting."

"Madame isn't reasonable; indeed, she isn't!" added Zoe.

Nana was already harassed, and these reproaches exasperated her. Was that the way people received her after the worry she had gone through?

"Will you blooming well leave me alone, eh?" she cried.

"Hush, ma'am, there are people in there," said the maid.

Then in lower tones the young Woman stuttered breathlessly:

"D'you suppose I've been having a good time? Why, there was no end to it. I should have liked to see you there! I was boiling with rage! I felt inclined to smack somebody. And never a cab to come home in! Luckily it's only a step from here, but never mind that; I did just run home."

"You have the money?" asked the aunt.

"Dear, dear! That question!" rejoined Nana.

She had sat herself down on a chair close up against the stove, for her legs had failed her after so much running, and without stopping to take breath she drew from behind her stays an envelope in which there were four hundred-franc notes. They were visible through a large rent she had torn with savage fingers in order to be sure of the contents. The three women round about her stared fixedly at the envelope, a big, crumpled, dirty receptacle, as it lay clasped in her small gloved hands.

It was too late now – Mme Lerat would not go to Rambouillet till tomorrow, and Nana entered into long explanations.

"There's company waiting for you," the lady's maid repeated.

But Nana grew excited again. The company might wait: she'd go to them all in good time when she'd finished. And as her aunt began putting her hand out for the money:

"Ah no! Not all of it," she said. "Three hundred francs for the nurse, fifty for your journey and expenses, that's three hundred and fifty. Fifty francs I keep."

The big difficulty was how to find change. There were not ten francs in the house. But they did not even address themselves to Mme Maloir who, never having more than a six-sou omnibus fair upon her, was listening in quite a disinterested manner. At length Zoe went out of the room, remarking that she would go and look in her box, and she brought back a hundred francs in hundred-sou pieces. They were counted out on a corner of the table, and Mme Lerat took her departure at once after having promised to bring Louiset back with her the following day.

"You say there's company there?" continued Nana, still sitting on the chair and resting herself.

"Yes, madame, three people."

And Zoe mentioned the banker first. Nana made a face. Did that man Steiner think she was going to let herself be bored because he had thrown her a bouquet yesterday evening?

"Besides, I've had enough of it," she declared. "I shan't receive today. Go and say you don't expect me now."

"Madame will think the matter over; Madame will receive Monsieur Steiner," murmured Zoe gravely, without budging from her place. She was annoyed to see her mistress on the verge of committing another foolish mistake.

Then she mentioned the Walachian, who ought by now to find time hanging heavy on his hands in the bedroom. Whereupon Nana grew furious and more obstinate than ever. No, she would see nobody, nobody! Who'd sent her such a blooming leech of a man?

"Chuck 'em all out! I – I'm going to play a game of bezique with Madame Maloir. I prefer doing that."

The bell interrupted her remarks. That was the last straw. Another of the beggars yet! She forbade Zoe to go and open the door, but the latter had left the kitchen without listening to her, and when she reappeared she brought back a couple of cards and said authoritatively:

"I told them that Madame was receiving visitors. The gentlemen are in the drawing room."

Nana had sprung up, raging, but the names of the Marquis de Chouard and of Count Muffat de Beuville, which were inscribed on the cards, calmed her down. For a moment or two she remained silent.

"Who are they?" she asked at last. "You know them?"

"I know the old fellow," replied Zoe, discreetly pursing up her lips.

And her mistress continuing to question her with her eyes, she added simply:

"I've seen him somewhere."

This remark seemed to decide the young woman. Regretfully she left the kitchen, that asylum of steaming warmth, where you could talk and take your ease amid the pleasant fumes of the coffeepot which was being kept warm over a handful of glowing embers. She left Mme Maloir behind her. That lady was now busy reading her fortune by the cards; she had never yet taken her hat off, but now in order to be more at her ease she undid the strings and threw them back over her shoulders.

In the dressing room, where Zoe rapidly helped her on with a tea gown, Nana revenged herself for the way in which they were all boring her by muttering quiet curses upon the male sex. These big words caused the lady's maid not a little distress, for she saw with pain that her mistress was not rising superior to her origin as quickly as she could have desired. She even made bold to beg Madame to calm herself.

"You bet," was Nana's crude answer; "they're swine; they glory in that sort of thing."

Nevertheless, she assumed her princesslike manner, as she was wont to call it. But just when she was turning to go into the drawing room Zoe held her back and herself introduced the Marquis de Chouard and the Count Muffat into the dressing room. It was much better so.

"I regret having kept you waiting, gentlemen," said the young woman with studied politeness.

The two men bowed and seated themselves. A blind of embroidered tulle kept the little room in twilight. It was the most elegant chamber in the flat, for it was hung with some light-colored fabric and contained a cheval glass framed in inlaid wood, a lounge chair and some others with arms and blue satin upholsteries. On the toilet table the bouquets – roses, lilacs and hyacinths – appeared like a very ruin of flowers. Their perfume was strong and penetrating, while through the dampish air of the place, which was full of the spoiled exhalations of the washstand, came occasional whiffs of a more pungent scent, the scent of some grains or dry patchouli ground to fine powder at the bottom of a cup. And as she gathered herself together and drew up her dressing jacket, which had been ill

fastened, Nana had all the appearance of having been surprised at her toilet: her skin was still damp; she smiled and looked quite startled amid her frills and laces.

"Madame, you will pardon our insistence," said the Count Muffat gravely. "We come on a quest. Monsieur and I are members of the Benevolent Organization of the district."

The Marquis de Chouard hastened gallantly to add:

"When we learned that a great artiste lived in this house we promised ourselves that we would put the claims of our poor people before her in a very special manner. Talent is never without a heart."

Nana pretended to be modest. She answered them with little assenting movements of her head, making rapid reflections at the same time. It must be the old man that had brought the other one: he had such wicked eyes. And yet the other was not to be trusted either: the veins near his temples were so queerly puffed up. He might quite well have come by himself. Ah, now that she thought of it, it was this way: the porter had given them her name, and they had egged one another on, each with his own ends in view.

"Most certainly, gentlemen, you were quite right to come up," she said with a very good grace.

But the electric bell made her tremble again. Another call, and that Zoe always opening the door! She went on:

"One is only too happy to be able to give."

At bottom she was flattered.

"Ah, madame," rejoined the marquis, "if only you knew about it! there's such misery! Our district has more than three thousand poor people in it, and yet it's one of the richest. You cannot picture to yourself anything like the present distress – children with no bread, women ill, utterly without assistance, perishing of the cold!"

"The poor souls!" cried Nana, very much moved.

Such was her feeling of compassion that tears flooded her fine eyes. No longer studying deportment, she leaned forward with a quick movement, and under her open dressing jacket her neck became visible, while the bent position of her knees served to outline the rounded contour of the thigh under the thin fabric of her skirt. A little flush of blood appeared in the marquis's cadaverous cheeks. Count Muffat, who was on the point of speaking, lowered his eyes. The air of that little room was too hot: it had the close, heavy warmth of a greenhouse. The roses were withering, and intoxicating odors floated up from the patchouli in the cup.

"One would like to be very rich on occasions like this," added Nana. "Well, well, we each do what we can. Believe me, gentlemen, if I had known – "

She was on the point of being guilty of a silly speech, so melted was she at heart. But she did not end her sentence and for a moment was worried at not being able to remember where she had put her fifty francs on changing her dress. But she recollected at last: they must be on the corner of her toilet table under an inverted pomatum pot. As she was in the act of rising the bell sounded for quite a long time. Capital! Another of them still! It would never end. The count and the marquis had both risen, too, and the ears of the latter seemed to be pricked up and, as it were, pointing toward the door; doubtless he knew that kind of ring. Muffat looked at him; then they averted their gaze mutually. They felt awkward and once more assumed their frigid bearing, the one looking square-set and solid with his thick head of hair, the other drawing back his lean shoulders, over which fell his fringe of thin white locks.

"My faith," said Nana, bringing the ten big silver pieces and quite determined to laugh about it, "I am going to entrust you with this, gentlemen. It is for the poor."

And the adorable little dimple in her chin became apparent. She assumed her favorite pose, her amiable baby expression, as she held the pile of five-franc pieces on her open palm and offered it to the men, as though she were saying to them, "Now then, who wants some?" The count was the sharper of the two. He took fifty francs but left one piece behind and, in order to gain possession of

it, had to pick it off the young woman's very skin, a moist, supple skin, the touch of which sent a thrill through him. She was thoroughly merry and did not cease laughing.

"Come, gentlemen," she continued. "Another time I hope to give more."

The gentlemen no longer had any pretext for staying, and they bowed and went toward the door. But just as they were about to go out the bell rang anew. The marquis could not conceal a faint smile, while a frown made the count look more grave than before. Nana detained them some seconds so as to give Zoe time to find yet another corner for the newcomers. She did not relish meetings at her house. Only this time the whole place must be packed! She was therefore much relieved when she saw the drawing room empty and asked herself whether Zoe had really stuffed them into the cupboards.

"Au revoir, gentlemen," she said, pausing on the threshold of the drawing room.

It was as though she lapped them in her laughing smile and clear, unclouded glance. The Count Muffat bowed slightly. Despite his great social experience he felt that he had lost his equilibrium. He needed air; he was overcome with the dizzy feeling engendered in that dressing room with a scent of flowers, with a feminine essence which choked him. And behind his back, the Marquis de Chouard, who was sure that he could not be seen, made so bold as to wink at Nana, his whole face suddenly altering its expression as he did so, and his tongue nigh lolling from his mouth.

When the young woman re-entered the little room, where Zoe was awaiting her with letters and visiting cards, she cried out, laughing more heartily than ever:

"There are a pair of beggars for you! Why, they've got away with my fifty francs!"

She wasn't vexed. It struck her as a joke that MEN should have got money out of her. All the same, they were swine, for she hadn't a sou left. But at sight of the cards and the letters her bad temper returned. As to the letters, why, she said "pass" to them. They were from fellows who, after applauding her last night, were now making their declarations. And as to the callers, they might go about their business!

Zoe had stowed them all over the place, and she called attention to the great capabilities of the flat, every room in which opened on the corridor. That wasn't the case at Mme Blanche's, where people had all to go through the drawing room. Oh yes, Mme Blanche had had plenty of bothers over it!

"You will send them all away," continued Nana in pursuance of her idea. "Begin with the nigger."

"Oh, as to him, madame, I gave him his marching orders a while ago," said Zoe with a grin. "He only wanted to tell Madame that he couldn't come to-night."

There was vast joy at this announcement, and Nana clapped her hands. He wasn't coming, what good luck! She would be free then! And she emitted sighs of relief, as though she had been let off the most abominable of tortures. Her first thought was for Daguenet. Poor duck, why, she had just written to tell him to wait till Thursday! Quick, quick, Mme Maloir should write a second letter! But Zoe announced that Mme Maloir had slipped away unnoticed, according to her wont. Whereupon Nana, after talking of sending someone to him, began to hesitate. She was very tired. A long night's sleep – oh, it would be so jolly! The thought of such a treat overcame her at last. For once in a way she could allow herself that!

"I shall go to bed when I come back from the theater," she murmured greedily, "and you won't wake me before noon."

Then raising her voice:

"Now then, gee up! Shove the others downstairs!"

Zoe did not move. She would never have dreamed of giving her mistress overt advice, only now she made shift to give Madame the benefit of her experience when Madame seemed to be running her hot head against a wall.

"Monsieur Steiner as well?" she queried curtly.

"Why, certainly!" replied Nana. "Before all the rest."

The maid still waited, in order to give her mistress time for reflection. Would not Madame be proud to get such a rich gentleman away from her rival Rose Mignon – a man, moreover, who was known in all the theaters?

"Now make haste, my dear," rejoined Nana, who perfectly understood the situation, "and tell him he pesters me."

But suddenly there was a reversion of feeling. Tomorrow she might want him. Whereupon she laughed, winked once or twice and with a naughty little gesture cried out:

"After all's said and done, if I want him the best way even now is to kick him out of doors."

Zoe seemed much impressed. Struck with a sudden admiration, she gazed at her mistress and then went and chucked Steiner out of doors without further deliberation.

Meanwhile Nana waited patiently for a second or two in order to give her time to sweep the place out, as she phrased it. No one would ever have expected such a siege! She craned her head into the drawing room and found it empty. The dining room was empty too. But as she continued her visitation in a calmer frame of mind, feeling certain that nobody remained behind, she opened the door of a closet and came suddenly upon a very young man. He was sitting on the top of a trunk, holding a huge bouquet on his knees and looking exceedingly quiet and extremely well behaved.

"Goodness gracious me!" she cried. "There's one of 'em in there even now!" The very young man had jumped down at sight of her and was blushing as red as a poppy. He did not know what to do with his bouquet, which he kept shifting from one hand to the other, while his looks betrayed the extreme of emotion. His youth, his embarrassment and the funny figure he cut in his struggles with his flowers melted Nana's heart, and she burst into a pretty peal of laughter. Well, now, the very children were coming, were they? Men were arriving in long clothes. So she gave up all airs and graces, became familiar and maternal, tapped her leg and asked for fun:

"You want me to wipe your nose; do you, baby?"

"Yes," replied the lad in a low, supplicating tone.

This answer made her merrier than ever. He was seventeen years old, he said. His name was Georges Hugon. He was at the Varietes last night and now he had come to see her.

"These flowers are for me?"

"Yes."

"Then give 'em to me, booby!"

But as she took the bouquet from him he sprang upon her hands and kissed them with all the gluttonous eagerness peculiar to his charming time of life. She had to beat him to make him let go. There was a dreadful little dribbling customer for you! But as she scolded him she flushed rosy-red and began smiling. And with that she sent him about his business, telling him that he might call again. He staggered away; he could not find the doors.

Nana went back into her dressing room, where Francis made his appearance almost simultaneously in order to dress her hair for the evening. Seated in front of her mirror and bending her head beneath the hairdresser's nimble hands, she stayed silently meditative. Presently, however, Zoe entered, remarking:

"There's one of them, madame, who refuses to go."

"Very well, he must be left alone," she answered quietly.

"If that comes to that they still keep arriving."

"Bah! Tell 'em to wait. When they begin to feel too hungry they'll be off." Her humor had changed, and she was now delighted to make people wait about for nothing. A happy thought struck her as very amusing; she escaped from beneath Francis' hands and ran and bolted the doors. They might now crowd in there as much as they liked; they would probably refrain from making a hole through the wall. Zoe could come in and out through the little doorway leading to the kitchen. However, the electric bell rang more lustily than ever. Every five minutes a clear, lively little ting-

ting recurred as regularly as if it had been produced by some well-adjusted piece of mechanism. And Nana counted these rings to while the time away withal. But suddenly she remembered something.

"I say, where are my burnt almonds?"

Francis, too, was forgetting about the burnt almonds. But now he drew a paper bag from one of the pockets of his frock coat and presented it to her with the discreet gesture of a man who is offering a lady a present. Nevertheless, whenever his accounts came to be settled, he always put the burnt almonds down on his bill. Nana put the bag between her knees and set to work munching her sweetmeats, turning her head from time to time under the hairdresser's gently compelling touch.

"The deuce," she murmured after a silence, "there's a troop for you!"

Thrice, in quick succession, the bell had sounded. Its summonses became fast and furious. There were modest tintinnabulations which seemed to stutter and tremble like a first avowal; there were bold rings which vibrated under some rough touch and hasty rings which sounded through the house with shivering rapidity. It was a regular peal, as Zoe said, a peal loud enough to upset the neighborhood, seeing that a whole mob of men were jabbing at the ivory button, one after the other. That old joker Bordenave had really been far too lavish with her address. Why, the whole of yesterday's house was coming!

"By the by, Francis, have you five louis?" said Nana.

He drew back, looked carefully at her headdress and then quietly remarked:

"Five louis, that's according!"

"Ah, you know if you want securities." she continued.

And without finishing her sentence, she indicated the adjoining rooms with a sweeping gesture. Francis lent the five louis. Zoe, during each momentary respite, kept coming in to get Madame's things ready. Soon she came to dress her while the hairdresser lingered with the intention of giving some finishing touches to the headdress. But the bell kept continually disturbing the lady's maid, who left Madame with her stays half laced and only one shoe on. Despite her long experience, the maid was losing her head. After bringing every nook and corner into requisition and putting men pretty well everywhere, she had been driven to stow them away in threes and fours, which was a course of procedure entirely opposed to her principles. So much the worse for them if they ate each other up! It would afford more room! And Nana, sheltering behind her carefully bolted door, began laughing at them, declaring that she could hear them pant. They ought to be looking lovely in there with their tongues hanging out like a lot of bowwows sitting round on their behinds. Yesterday's success was not yet over, and this pack of men had followed up her scent.

"Provided they don't break anything," she murmured.

She began to feel some anxiety, for she fancied she felt their hot breath coming through chinks in the door. But Zoe ushered Labordette in, and the young woman gave a little shout of relief. He was anxious to tell her about an account he had settled for her at the justice of peace's court. But she did not attend and said:

"I'll take you along with me. We'll have dinner together, and afterward you shall escort me to the Varietes. I don't go on before half-past nine."

Good old Labordette, how lucky it was he had come! He was a fellow who never asked for any favors. He was only the friend of the women, whose little bits of business he arranged for them. Thus on his way in he had dismissed the creditors in the anteroom. Indeed, those good folks really didn't want to be paid. On the contrary, if they HAD been pressing for payment it was only for the sake of complimenting Madame and of personally renewing their offers of service after her grand success of yesterday.

"Let's be off, let's be off," said Nana, who was dressed by now.

But at that moment Zoe came in again, shouting:

"I refuse to open the door any more. They're waiting in a crowd all down the stairs."

A crowd all down the stairs! Francis himself, despite the English stolidity of manner which he was wont to affect, began laughing as he put up his combs. Nana, who had already taken Labordette's arm, pushed him into the kitchen and effected her escape. At last she was delivered from the men and felt happily conscious that she might now enjoy his society anywhere without fear of stupid interruptions.

"You shall see me back to my door," she said as they went down the kitchen stairs. "I shall feel safe, in that case. Just fancy, I want to sleep a whole night quite by myself – yes, a whole night! It's sort of infatuation, dear boy!"

CHAPTER III

The countess Sabine, as it had become customary to call Mme Muffat de Beuville in order to distinguish her from the count's mother, who had died the year before, was wont to receive every Tuesday in her house in the Rue Miromesnil at the corner of the Rue de Pentievre. It was a great square building, and the Muffats had lived in it for a hundred years or more. On the side of the street its frontage seemed to slumber, so lofty was it and dark, so sad and convent-like, with its great outer shutters, which were nearly always closed. And at the back in a little dark garden some trees had grown up and were straining toward the sunlight with such long slender branches that their tips were visible above the roof.

This particular Tuesday, toward ten o'clock in the evening, there were scarcely a dozen people in the drawing room. When she was only expecting intimate friends the countess opened neither the little drawing room nor the dining room. One felt more at home on such occasions and chatted round the fire. The drawing room was very large and very lofty; its four windows looked out upon the garden, from which, on this rainy evening of the close of April, issued a sensation of damp despite the great logs burning on the hearth. The sun never shone down into the room; in the daytime it was dimly lit up by a faint greenish light, but at night, when the lamps and the chandelier were burning, it looked merely a serious old chamber with its massive mahogany First Empire furniture, its hangings and chair coverings of yellow velvet, stamped with a large design. Entering it, one was in an atmosphere of cold dignity, of ancient manners, of a vanished age, the air of which seemed devotional.

Opposite the armchair, however, in which the count's mother had died – a square armchair of formal design and inhospitable padding, which stood by the hearthside – the Countess Sabine was seated in a deep and cozy lounge, the red silk upholsteries of which were soft as eider down. It was the only piece of modern furniture there, a fanciful item introduced amid the prevailing severity and clashing with it.

"So we shall have the shah of Persia," the young woman was saying.

They were talking of the crowned heads who were coming to Paris for the exhibition. Several ladies had formed a circle round the hearth, and Mme du Joncquoy, whose brother, a diplomat, had just fulfilled a mission in the East, was giving some details about the court of Nazr-ed-Din.

"Are you out of sorts, my dear?" asked Mme Chantereau, the wife of an ironmaster, seeing the countess shivering slightly and growing pale as she did so.

"Oh no, not at all," replied the latter, smiling. "I felt a little cold. This drawing room takes so long to warm."

And with that she raised her melancholy eyes and scanned the walls from floor to ceiling. Her daughter Estelle, a slight, insignificant-looking girl of sixteen, the thankless period of life, quitted the large footstool on which she was sitting and silently came and propped up one of the logs which had rolled from its place. But Mme de Chezelles, a convent friend of Sabine's and her junior by five years, exclaimed:

"Dear me, I would gladly be possessed of a drawing room such as yours! At any rate, you are able to receive visitors. They only build boxes nowadays. Oh, if I were in your place!"

She ran giddily on and with lively gestures explained how she would alter the hangings, the seats – everything, in fact. Then she would give balls to which all Paris should run. Behind her seat her husband, a magistrate, stood listening with serious air. It was rumored that she deceived him quite openly, but people pardoned her offense and received her just the same, because, they said, "she's not answerable for her actions."

"Oh that Leonide!" the Countess Sabine contented herself by murmuring, smiling her faint smile the while.

With a languid movement she eked out the thought that was in her. After having lived there seventeen years she certainly would not alter her drawing room now. It would henceforth remain just such as her mother-in-law had wished to preserve it during her lifetime. Then returning to the subject of conversation:

"I have been assured," she said, "that we shall also have the king of Prussia and the emperor of Russia."

"Yes, some very fine fetes are promised," said Mme du Joncquoy.

The banker Steiner, not long since introduced into this circle by Leonide de Chezelles, who was acquainted with the whole of Parisian society, was sitting chatting on a sofa between two of the windows. He was questioning a deputy, from whom he was endeavoring with much adroitness to elicit news about a movement on the stock exchange of which he had his suspicions, while the Count Muffat, standing in front of them, was silently listening to their talk, looking, as he did so, even grayer than was his wont.

Four or five young men formed another group near the door round the Count Xavier de Vandeuvres, who in a low tone was telling them an anecdote. It was doubtless a very risky one, for they were choking with laughter. Companionless in the center of the room, a stout man, a chief clerk at the Ministry of the Interior, sat heavily in an armchair, dozing with his eyes open. But when one of the young men appeared to doubt the truth of the anecdote Vandeuvres raised his voice.

"You are too much of a skeptic, Foucarmont; you'll spoil all your pleasures that way."

And he returned to the ladies with a laugh. Last scion of a great family, of feminine manners and witty tongue, he was at that time running through a fortune with a rage of life and appetite which nothing could appease. His racing stable, which was one of the best known in Paris, cost him a fabulous amount of money; his betting losses at the Imperial Club amounted monthly to an alarming number of pounds, while taking one year with another, his mistresses would be always devouring now a farm, now some acres of arable land or forest, which amounted, in fact, to quite a respectable slice of his vast estates in Picardy.

"I advise you to call other people skeptics! Why, you don't believe a thing yourself," said Leonide, making shift to find him a little space in which to sit down at her side.

"It's you who spoil your own pleasures."

"Exactly," he replied. "I wish to make others benefit by my experience."

But the company imposed silence on him: he was scandalizing M. Venot. And, the ladies having changed their positions, a little old man of sixty, with bad teeth and a subtle smile, became visible in the depths of an easy chair. There he sat as comfortably as in his own house, listening to everybody's remarks and making none himself. With a slight gesture he announced himself by no means scandalized. Vandeuvres once more assumed his dignified bearing and added gravely:

"Monsieur Venot is fully aware that I believe what it is one's duty to believe."

It was an act of faith, and even Leonide appeared satisfied. The young men at the end of the room no longer laughed; the company were old fogies, and amusement was not to be found there. A cold breath of wind had passed over them, and amid the ensuing silence Steiner's nasal voice became audible. The deputy's discreet answers were at last driving him to desperation. For a second or two the Countess Sabine looked at the fire; then she resumed the conversation.

"I saw the king of Prussia at Baden-Baden last year. He's still full of vigor for his age."

"Count Bismarck is to accompany him," said Mme du Joncquoy. "Do you know the count? I lunched with him at my brother's ages ago, when he was representative of Prussia in Paris. There's a man now whose latest successes I cannot in the least understand."

"But why?" asked Mme Chantereau.

"Good gracious, how am I to explain? He doesn't please me. His appearance is boorish and underbred. Besides, so far as I am concerned, I find him stupid."

With that the whole room spoke of Count Bismarck, and opinions differed considerably. Vandeuvres knew him and assured the company that he was great in his cups and at play. But when the discussion was at its height the door was opened, and Hector de la Falois made his appearance. Fauchery, who followed in his wake, approached the countess and, bowing:

"Madame," he said, "I have not forgotten your extremely kind invitation."

She smiled and made a pretty little speech. The journalist, after bowing to the count, stood for some moments in the middle of the drawing room. He only recognized Steiner and accordingly looked rather out of his element. But Vandeuvres turned and came and shook hands with him. And forthwith, in his delight at the meeting and with a sudden desire to be confidential, Fauchery buttonholed him and said in a low voice:

"It's tomorrow. Are you going?"

"Egad, yes."

"At midnight, at her house.

"I know, I know. I'm going with Blanche."

He wanted to escape and return to the ladies in order to urge yet another reason in M. de Bismarck's favor. But Fauchery detained him.

"You never will guess whom she has charged me to invite."

And with a slight nod he indicated Count Muffat, who was just then discussing a knotty point in the budget with Steiner and the deputy.

"It's impossible," said Vandeuvres, stupefaction and merriment in his tones. "My word on it! I had to swear that I would bring him to her. Indeed, that's one of my reasons for coming here."

Both laughed silently, and Vandeuvres, hurriedly rejoining the circle of ladies, cried out:

"I declare that on the contrary Monsieur de Bismarck is exceedingly witty. For instance, one evening he said a charmingly epigrammatic thing in my presence."

La Faloise meanwhile had heard the few rapid sentences thus whisperingly interchanged, and he gazed at Fauchery in hopes of an explanation which was not vouchsafed him. Of whom were they talking, and what were they going to do at midnight tomorrow? He did not leave his cousin's side again. The latter had gone and seated himself. He was especially interested by the Countess Sabine. Her name had often been mentioned in his presence, and he knew that, having been married at the age of seventeen, she must now be thirty-four and that since her marriage she had passed a cloistered existence with her husband and her mother-in-law. In society some spoke of her as a woman of religious chastity, while others pitied her and recalled to memory her charming bursts of laughter and the burning glances of her great eyes in the days prior to her imprisonment in this old town house. Fauchery scrutinized her and yet hesitated. One of his friends, a captain who had recently died in Mexico, had, on the very eve of his departure, made him one of those gross postprandial confessions, of which even the most prudent among men are occasionally guilty. But of this he only retained a vague recollection; they had dined not wisely but too well that evening, and when he saw the countess, in her black dress and with her quiet smile, seated in that Old World drawing room, he certainly had his doubts. A lamp which had been placed behind her threw into clear relief her dark, delicate, plump side face, wherein a certain heaviness in the contours of the mouth alone indicated a species of imperious sensuality.

"What do they want with their Bismarck?" muttered La Faloise, whose constant pretense it was to be bored in good society. "One's ready to kick the bucket here. A pretty idea of yours it was to want to come!"

Fauchery questioned him abruptly.

"Now tell me, does the countess admit someone to her embraces?"

"Oh dear, no, no! My dear fellow!" he stammered, manifestly taken aback and quite forgetting his pose. "Where d'you think we are?"

After which he was conscious of a want of up-to-dateness in this outburst of indignation and, throwing himself back on a great sofa, he added:

"Gad! I say no! But I don't know much about it. There's a little chap out there, Foucarmont they call him, who's to be met with everywhere and at every turn. One's seen faster men than that, though, you bet. However, it doesn't concern me, and indeed, all I know is that if the countess indulges in high jinks she's still pretty sly about it, for the thing never gets about – nobody talks."

Then although Fauchery did not take the trouble to question him, he told him all he knew about the Muffats. Amid the conversation of the ladies, which still continued in front of the hearth, they both spoke in subdued tones, and, seeing them there with their white cravats and gloves, one might have supposed them to be discussing in chosen phraseology some really serious topic. Old Mme Muffat then, whom La Faloise had been well acquainted with, was an insufferable old lady, always hand in glove with the priests. She had the grand manner, besides, and an authoritative way of comporting herself, which bent everybody to her will. As to Muffat, he was an old man's child; his father, a general, had been created count by Napoleon I, and naturally he had found himself in favor after the second of December. He hadn't much gaiety of manner either, but he passed for a very honest man of straightforward intentions and understanding. Add to these a code of old aristocratic ideas and such a lofty conception of his duties at court, of his dignities and of his virtues, that he behaved like a god on wheels. It was the Mamma Muffat who had given him this precious education with its daily visits to the confessional, its complete absence of escapades and of all that is meant by youth. He was a practicing Christian and had attacks of faith of such fiery violence that they might be likened to accesses of burning fever. Finally, in order to add a last touch to the picture, La Faloise whispered something in his cousin's ear.

"You don't say so!" said the latter.

"On my word of honor, they swore it was true! He was still like that when he married."

Fauchery chuckled as he looked at the count, whose face, with its fringe of whiskers and absence of mustaches, seemed to have grown squarer and harder now that he was busy quoting figures to the writhing, struggling Steiner.

"My word, he's got a phiz for it!" murmured Fauchery. "A pretty present he made his wife! Poor little thing, how he must have bored her! She knows nothing about anything, I'll wager!"

Just then the Countess Sabine was saying something to him. But he did not hear her, so amusing and extraordinary did he esteem the Muffats' case. She repeated the question.

"Monsieur Fauchery, have you not published a sketch of Monsieur de Bismarck? You spoke with him once?"

He got up briskly and approached the circle of ladies, endeavoring to collect himself and soon with perfect ease of manner finding an answer:

"Dear me, madame, I assure you I wrote that 'portrait' with the help of biographies which had been published in Germany. I have never seen Monsieur de Bismarck."

He remained beside the countess and, while talking with her, continued his meditations. She did not look her age; one would have set her down as being twenty-eight at most, for her eyes, above all, which were filled with the dark blue shadow of her long eyelashes, retained the glowing light of youth. Bred in a divided family, so that she used to spend one month with the Marquis de Chouard, another with the marquise, she had been married very young, urged on, doubtless, by her father, whom she embarrassed after her mother's death. A terrible man was the marquis, a man about whom strange tales were beginning to be told, and that despite his lofty piety! Fauchery asked if he should have the honor of meeting him. Certainly her father was coming, but only very late; he had so much work on hand! The journalist thought he knew where the old gentleman passed his evenings and looked grave. But a mole, which he noticed close to her mouth on the countess's left cheek, surprised him. Nana had precisely the same mole. It was curious. Tiny hairs curled up on it, only they were golden in Nana's case, black as jet in this. Ah well, never mind! This woman enjoyed nobody's embraces.

"I have always felt a wish to know Queen Augusta," she said. "They say she is so good, so devout. Do you think she will accompany the king?"

"It is not thought that she will, madame," he replied.

She had no lovers: the thing was only too apparent. One had only to look at her there by the side of that daughter of hers, sitting so insignificant and constrained on her footstool. That sepulchral drawing room of hers, which exhaled odors suggestive of being in a church, spoke as plainly as words could of the iron hand, the austere mode of existence, that weighed her down. There was nothing suggestive of her own personality in that ancient abode, black with the damps of years. It was Muffat who made himself felt there, who dominated his surroundings with his devotional training, his penances and his fasts. But the sight of the little old gentleman with the black teeth and subtle smile whom he suddenly discovered in his armchair behind the group of ladies afforded him a yet more decisive argument. He knew the personage. It was Theophile Venot, a retired lawyer who had made a specialty of church cases. He had left off practice with a handsome fortune and was now leading a sufficiently mysterious existence, for he was received everywhere, treated with great deference and even somewhat feared, as though he had been the representative of a mighty force, an occult power, which was felt to be at his back. Nevertheless, his behavior was very humble. He was churchwarden at the Madeleine Church and had simply accepted the post of deputy mayor at the town house of the Ninth Arrondissement in order, as he said, to have something to do in his leisure time. Deuce take it, the countess was well guarded; there was nothing to be done in that quarter.

"You're right, it's enough to make one kick the bucket here," said Fauchery to his cousin when he had made good his escape from the circle of ladies. "We'll hook it!"

But Steiner, deserted at last by the Count Muffat and the deputy, came up in a fury. Drops of perspiration stood on his forehead, and he grumbled huskily:

"Gad! Let 'em tell me nothing, if nothing they want to tell me. I shall find people who will talk."

Then he pushed the journalist into a corner and, altering his tone, said in accents of victory:

"It's tomorrow, eh? I'm of the party, my bully!"

"Indeed!" muttered Fauchery with some astonishment.

"You didn't know about it. Oh, I had lots of bother to find her at home. Besides, Mignon never would leave me alone."

"But they're to be there, are the Mignons."

"Yes, she told me so. In fact, she did receive my visit, and she invited me. Midnight punctually, after the play."

The banker was beaming. He winked and added with a peculiar emphasis on the words:

"You've worked it, eh?"

"Eh, what?" said Fauchery, pretending not to understand him. "She wanted to thank me for my article, so she came and called on me."

"Yes, yes. You fellows are fortunate. You get rewarded. By the by, who pays the piper tomorrow?"

The journalist made a slight outward movement with his arms, as though he would intimate that no one had ever been able to find out. But Vandeuvres called to Steiner, who knew M. de Bismarck. Mme du Joncquoy had almost convinced herself of the truth of her suppositions; she concluded with these words:

"He gave me an unpleasant impression. I think his face is evil. But I am quite willing to believe that he has a deal of wit. It would account for his successes."

"Without doubt," said the banker with a faint smile. He was a Jew from Frankfort.

Meanwhile La Faloise at last made bold to question his cousin. He followed him up and got inside his guard:

"There's supper at a woman's tomorrow evening? With which of them, eh? With which of them?"

Fauchery motioned to him that they were overheard and must respect the conventions here. The door had just been opened anew, and an old lady had come in, followed by a young man in whom the journalist recognized the truant schoolboy, perpetrator of the famous and as yet unforgotten "tres chic" of the Blonde Venus first night. This lady's arrival caused a stir among the company. The Countess Sabine had risen briskly from her seat in order to go and greet her, and she had taken both her hands in hers and addressed her as her "dear Madame Hugon." Seeing that his cousin viewed this little episode with some curiosity, La Faloise sought to arouse his interest and in a few brief phrases explained the position. Mme Hugon, widow of a notary, lived in retirement at Les Fondettes, an old estate of her family's in the neighborhood of Orleans, but she also kept up a small establishment in Paris in a house belonging to her in the Rue de Richelieu and was now passing some weeks there in order to settle her youngest son, who was reading the law and in his "first year." In old times she had been a dear friend of the Marquise de Chouard and had assisted at the birth of the countess, who, prior to her marriage, used to stay at her house for months at a time and even now was quite familiarly treated by her.

"I have brought Georges to see you," said Mme Hugon to Sabine. "He's grown, I trust."

The young man with his clear eyes and the fair curls which suggested a girl dressed up as a boy bowed easily to the countess and reminded her of a bout of battledore and shuttlecock they had had together two years ago at Les Fondettes.

"Philippe is not in Paris?" asked Count Muffat.

"Dear me, no!" replied the old lady. "He is always in garrison at Bourges." She had seated herself and began talking with considerable pride of her eldest son, a great big fellow who, after enlisting in a fit of waywardness, had of late very rapidly attained the rank of lieutenant. All the ladies behaved to her with respectful sympathy, and conversation was resumed in a tone at once more amiable and more refined. Fauchery, at sight of that respectable Mme Hugon, that motherly face lit up with such a kindly smile beneath its broad tresses of white hair, thought how foolish he had been to suspect the Countess Sabine even for an instant.

Nevertheless, the big chair with the red silk upholsteries in which the countess sat had attracted his attention. Its style struck him as crude, not to say fantastically suggestive, in that dim old drawing room. Certainly it was not the count who had inveigled thither that nest of voluptuous idleness. One might have described it as an experiment, marking the birth of an appetite and of an enjoyment. Then he forgot where he was, fell into brown study and in thought even harked back to that vague confidential announcement imparted to him one evening in the dining room of a restaurant. Impelled by a sort of sensuous curiosity, he had always wanted an introduction into the Muffats' circle, and now that his friend was in Mexico through all eternity, who could tell what might happen? "We shall see," he thought. It was a folly, doubtless, but the idea kept tormenting him; he felt himself drawn on and his animal nature aroused. The big chair had a rumpled look – its nether cushions had been tumbled, a fact which now amused him.

"Well, shall we be off?" asked La Faloise, mentally vowing that once outside he would find out the name of the woman with whom people were going to sup.

"All in good time," replied Fauchery.

But he was no longer in any hurry and excused himself on the score of the invitation he had been commissioned to give and had as yet not found a convenient opportunity to mention. The ladies were chatting about an assumption of the veil, a very touching ceremony by which the whole of Parisian society had for the last three days been greatly moved. It was the eldest daughter of the Baronne de Fougeray, who, under stress of an irresistible vocation, had just entered the Carmelite Convent. Mme Chantereau, a distant cousin of the Fougerays, told how the baroness had been obliged to take to her bed the day after the ceremony, so overdone was she with weeping.

"I had a very good place," declared Leonide. "I found it interesting."

Nevertheless, Mme Hugon pitied the poor mother. How sad to lose a daughter in such a way!

"I am accused of being overreligious," she said in her quiet, frank manner, "but that does not prevent me thinking the children very cruel who obstinately commit such suicide."

"Yes, it's a terrible thing," murmured the countess, shivering a little, as became a chilly person, and huddling herself anew in the depths of her big chair in front of the fire.

Then the ladies fell into a discussion. But their voices were discreetly attuned, while light trills of laughter now and again interrupted the gravity of their talk. The two lamps on the chimney piece, which had shades of rose-colored lace, cast a feeble light over them while on scattered pieces of furniture there burned but three other lamps, so that the great drawing room remained in soft shadow.

Steiner was getting bored. He was describing to Fauchery an escapade of that little Mme de Chezelles, whom he simply referred to as Leonide. "A blackguard woman," he said, lowering his voice behind the ladies' armchairs. Fauchery looked at her as she sat quaintly perched, in her voluminous ball dress of pale blue satin, on the corner of her armchair. She looked as slight and impudent as a boy, and he ended by feeling astonished at seeing her there. People comported themselves better at Caroline Hequet's, whose mother had arranged her house on serious principles. Here was a perfect subject for an article. What a strange world was this world of Paris! The most rigid circles found themselves invaded. Evidently that silent Theophile Venot, who contented himself by smiling and showing his ugly teeth, must have been a legacy from the late countess. So, too, must have been such ladies of mature age as Mme Chantereau and Mme du Joncquoy, besides four or five old gentlemen who sat motionless in corners. The Count Muffat attracted to the house a series of functionaries, distinguished by the immaculate personal appearance which was at that time required of the men at the Tuileries. Among others there was the chief clerk, who still sat solitary in the middle of the room with his closely shorn cheeks, his vacant glance and his coat so tight of fit that he could scarce venture to move. Almost all the young men and certain individuals with distinguished, aristocratic manners were the Marquis de Chouard's contribution to the circle, he having kept touch with the Legitimist party after making his peace with the empire on his entrance into the Council of State. There remained Leonide de Chezelles and Steiner, an ugly little knot against which Mme Hugon's elderly and amiable serenity stood out in strange contrast. And Fauchery, having sketched out his article, named this last group "Countess Sabine's little clique."

"On another occasion," continued Steiner in still lower tones, "Leonide got her tenor down to Montauban. She was living in the Chateau de Beaurecueil, two leagues farther off, and she used to come in daily in a carriage and pair in order to visit him at the Lion d'Or, where he had put up. The carriage used to wait at the door, and Leonide would stay for hours in the house, while a crowd gathered round and looked at the horses."

There was a pause in the talk, and some solemn moments passed silently by in the lofty room. Two young men were whispering, but they ceased in their turn, and the hushed step of Count Muffat was alone audible as he crossed the floor. The lamps seemed to have paled; the fire was going out; a stern shadow fell athwart the old friends of the house where they sat in the chairs they had occupied there for forty years back. It was as though in a momentary pause of conversation the invited guests had become suddenly aware that the count's mother, in all her glacial stateliness, had returned among them.

But the Countess Sabine had once more resumed:

"Well, at last the news of it got about. The young man was likely to die, and that would explain the poor child's adoption of the religious life. Besides, they say that Monsieur de Fougeray would never have given his consent to the marriage."

"They say heaps of other things too," cried Leonide giddily.

She fell a-laughing; she refused to talk. Sabine was won over by this gaiety and put her handkerchief up to her lips. And in the vast and solemn room their laughter sounded a note which struck Fauchery strangely, the note of delicate glass breaking. Assuredly here was the first beginning of the "little rift." Everyone began talking again. Mme du Joncquoy demurred; Mme Chantereau

knew for certain that a marriage had been projected but that matters had gone no further; the men even ventured to give their opinions. For some minutes the conversation was a babel of opinions, in which the divers elements of the circle, whether Bonapartist or Legitimist or merely worldly and skeptical, appeared to jostle one another simultaneously. Estelle had rung to order wood to be put on the fire; the footman turned up the lamps; the room seemed to wake from sleep. Fauchery began smiling, as though once more at his ease.

"Egad, they become the brides of God when they couldn't be their cousin's," said Vandeuvres between his teeth.

The subject bored him, and he had rejoined Fauchery.

"My dear fellow, have you ever seen a woman who was really loved become a nun?"

He did not wait for an answer, for he had had enough of the topic, and in a hushed voice:

"Tell me," he said, "how many of us will there be tomorrow? There'll be the Mignons, Steiner, yourself, Blanche and I; who else?"

"Caroline, I believe, and Simonne and Gaga without doubt. One never knows exactly, does one? On such occasions one expects the party will number twenty, and you're really thirty."

Vandeuvres, who was looking at the ladies, passed abruptly to another subject:

"She must have been very nice-looking, that Du Joncquoy woman, some fifteen years ago. Poor Estelle has grown lankier than ever. What a nice lath to put into a bed!"

But interrupting himself, he returned to the subject of tomorrow's supper.

"What's so tiresome of those shows is that it's always the same set of women. One wants a novelty. Do try and invent a new girl. By Jove, happy thought! I'll go and beseech that stout man to bring the woman he was trotting about the other evening at the Varietes."

He referred to the chief clerk, sound asleep in the middle of the drawing room. Fauchery, afar off, amused himself by following this delicate negotiation. Vandeuvres had sat himself down by the stout man, who still looked very sedate. For some moments they both appeared to be discussing with much propriety the question before the house, which was, "How can one discover the exact state of feeling that urges a young girl to enter into the religious life?" Then the count returned with the remark:

"It's impossible. He swears she's straight. She'd refuse, and yet I would have wagered that I once saw her at Laure's."

"Eh, what? You go to Laure's?" murmured Fauchery with a chuckle. "You venture your reputation in places like that? I was under the impression that it was only we poor devils of outsiders who – "

"Ah, dear boy, one ought to see every side of life."

Then they sneered and with sparkling eyes they compared notes about the table d'hote in the Rue des Martyrs, where big Laure Piedefer ran a dinner at three francs a head for little women in difficulties. A nice hole, where all the little women used to kiss Laure on the lips! And as the Countess Sabine, who had overheard a stray word or two, turned toward them, they started back, rubbing shoulders in excited merriment. They had not noticed that Georges Hugon was close by and that he was listening to them, blushing so hotly the while that a rosy flush had spread from his ears to his girlish throat. The infant was full of shame and of ecstasy. From the moment his mother had turned him loose in the room he had been hovering in the wake of Mme de Chezelles, the only woman present who struck him as being the thing. But after all is said and done, Nana licked her to fits!

"Yesterday evening," Mme Hugon was saying, "Georges took me to the play. Yes, we went to the Varietes, where I certainly had not set foot for the last ten years. That child adores music. As to me, I wasn't in the least amused, but he was so happy! They put extraordinary pieces on the stage nowadays. Besides, music delights me very little, I confess."

"What! You don't love music, madame?" cried Mme du Joncquoy, lifting her eyes to heaven. "Is it possible there should be people who don't love music?"

The exclamation of surprise was general. No one had dropped a single word concerning the performance at the Varietes, at which the good Mme Hugon had not understood any of the allusions. The ladies knew the piece but said nothing about it, and with that they plunged into the realm of sentiment and began discussing the masters in a tone of refined and ecstatical admiration. Mme du Joncquoy was not fond of any of them save Weber, while Mme Chantereau stood up for the Italians. The ladies' voices had turned soft and languishing, and in front of the hearth one might have fancied one's self listening in meditative, religious retirement to the faint, discreet music of a little chapel.

"Now let's see," murmured Vandeuvres, bringing Fauchery back into the middle of the drawing room, "notwithstanding it all, we must invent a woman for tomorrow. Shall we ask Steiner about it?"

"Oh, when Steiner's got hold of a woman," said the journalist, "it's because Paris has done with her."

Vandeuvres, however, was searching about on every side.

"Wait a bit," he continued, "the other day I met Foucarmont with a charming blonde. I'll go and tell him to bring her."

And he called to Foucarmont. They exchanged a few words rapidly. There must have been some sort of complication, for both of them, moving carefully forward and stepping over the dresses of the ladies, went off in quest of another young man with whom they continued the discussion in the embrasure of a window. Fauchery was left to himself and had just decided to proceed to the hearth, where Mme du Joncquoy was announcing that she never heard Weber played without at the same time seeing lakes, forests and sunrises over landscapes steeped in dew, when a hand touched his shoulder and a voice behind him remarked:

"It's not civil of you."

"What d'you mean?" he asked, turning round and recognizing La Faloise.

"Why, about that supper tomorrow. You might easily have got me invited."

Fauchery was at length about to state his reasons when Vandeuvres came back to tell him:

"It appears it isn't a girl of Foucarmont's. It's that man's flame out there. She won't be able to come. What a piece of bad luck! But all the same I've pressed Foucarmont into the service, and he's going to try to get Louise from the Palais-Royal."

"Is it not true, Monsieur de Vandeuvres," asked Mme Chantereau, raising her voice, "that Wagner's music was hissed last Sunday?"

"Oh, frightfully, madame," he made answer, coming forward with his usual exquisite politeness.

Then, as they did not detain him, he moved off and continued whispering in the journalist's ear:

"I'm going to press some more of them. These young fellows must know some little ladies."

With that he was observed to accost men and to engage them in conversation in his usual amiable and smiling way in every corner of the drawing room. He mixed with the various groups, said something confidently to everyone and walked away again with a sly wink and a secret signal or two. It looked as though he were giving out a watchword in that easy way of his. The news went round; the place of meeting was announced, while the ladies' sentimental dissertations on music served to conceal the small, feverish rumor of these recruiting operations.

"No, do not speak of your Germans," Mme Chantereau was saying. "Song is gaiety; song is light. Have you heard Patti in the Barber of Seville?"

"She was delicious!" murmured Leonide, who strummed none but operatic airs on her piano.

Meanwhile the Countess Sabine had rung. When on Tuesdays the number of visitors was small, tea was handed round the drawing room itself. While directing a footman to clear a round table the countess followed the Count de Vandeuvres with her eyes. She still smiled that vague smile which slightly disclosed her white teeth, and as the count passed she questioned him.

"What ARE you plotting, Monsieur de Vandeuvres?"

"What am I plotting, madame?" he answered quietly. "Nothing at all."

"Really! I saw you so busy. Pray, wait, you shall make yourself useful!"

She placed an album in his hands and asked him to put it on the piano. But he found means to inform Fauchery in a low whisper that they would have Tatan Nene, the most finely developed girl that winter, and Maria Blond, the same who had just made her first appearance at the Folies-Dramatiques. Meanwhile La Faloise stopped him at every step in hopes of receiving an invitation. He ended by offering himself, and Vandeuvres engaged him in the plot at once; only he made him promise to bring Clarisse with him, and when La Faloise pretended to scruple about certain points he quieted him by the remark:

"Since I invite you that's enough!"

Nevertheless, La Faloise would have much liked to know the name of the hostess. But the countess had recalled Vandeuvres and was questioning him as to the manner in which the English made tea. He often betook himself to England, where his horses ran. Then as though he had been inwardly following up quite a laborious train of thought during his remarks, he broke in with the question:

"And the marquis, by the by? Are we not to see him?"

"Oh, certainly you will! My father made me a formal promise that he would come," replied the countess. "But I'm beginning to be anxious. His duties will have kept him."

Vandeuvres smiled a discreet smile. He, too, seemed to have his doubts as to the exact nature of the Marquis de Chouard's duties. Indeed, he had been thinking of a pretty woman whom the marquis occasionally took into the country with him. Perhaps they could get her too.

In the meantime Fauchery decided that the moment had come in which to risk giving Count Muff his invitation. The evening, in fact, was drawing to a close.

"Are you serious?" asked Vandeuvres, who thought a joke was intended.

"Extremely serious. If I don't execute my commission she'll tear my eyes out. It's a case of landing her fish, you know."

"Well then, I'll help you, dear boy."

Eleven o'clock struck. Assisted by her daughter, the countess was pouring out the tea, and as hardly any guests save intimate friends had come, the cups and the platefuls of little cakes were being circulated without ceremony. Even the ladies did not leave their armchairs in front of the fire and sat sipping their tea and nibbling cakes which they held between their finger tips. From music the talk had declined to purveyors. Boissier was the only person for sweetmeats and Catherine for ices. Mme Chantereau, however, was all for Latinville. Speech grew more and more indolent, and a sense of lassitude was lulling the room to sleep. Steiner had once more set himself secretly to undermine the deputy, whom he held in a state of blockade in the corner of a settee. M. Venot, whose teeth must have been ruined by sweet things, was eating little dry cakes, one after the other, with a small nibbling sound suggestive of a mouse, while the chief clerk, his nose in a teacup, seemed never to be going to finish its contents. As to the countess, she went in a leisurely way from one guest to another, never pressing them, indeed, only pausing a second or two before the gentlemen whom she viewed with an air of dumb interrogation before she smiled and passed on. The great fire had flushed all her face, and she looked as if she were the sister of her daughter, who appeared so withered and ungainly at her side. When she drew near Fauchery, who was chatting with her husband and Vandeuvres, she noticed that they grew suddenly silent; accordingly she did not stop but handed the cup of tea she was offering to Georges Hugon beyond them.

"It's a lady who desires your company at supper," the journalist gaily continued, addressing Count Muffat.

The last-named, whose face had worn its gray look all the evening, seemed very much surprised. What lady was it?

"Oh, Nana!" said Vandeuvres, by way of forcing the invitation.

The count became more grave than before. His eyelids trembled just perceptibly, while a look of discomfort, such as headache produces, hovered for a moment athwart his forehead.

"But I'm not acquainted with that lady," he murmured.

"Come, come, you went to her house," remarked Vandeuvres.

"What d'you say? I went to her house? Oh yes, the other day, in behalf of the Benevolent Organization. I had forgotten about it. But, no matter, I am not acquainted with her, and I cannot accept."

He had adopted an icy expression in order to make them understand that this jest did not appear to him to be in good taste. A man of his position did not sit down at tables of such women as that. Vandeuvres protested: it was to be a supper party of dramatic and artistic people, and talent excused everything. But without listening further to the arguments urged by Fauchery, who spoke of a dinner where the Prince of Scots, the son of a queen, had sat down beside an ex-music-hall singer, the count only emphasized his refusal. In so doing, he allowed himself, despite his great politeness, to be guilty of an irritated gesture.

Georges and La Faloise, standing in front of each other drinking their tea, had overheard the two or three phrases exchanged in their immediate neighborhood.

"Jove, it's at Nana's then," murmured La Faloise. "I might have expected as much!"

Georges said nothing, but he was all aflame. His fair hair was in disorder; his blue eyes shone like tapers, so fiercely had the vice, which for some days past had surrounded him, inflamed and stirred his blood. At last he was going to plunge into all that he had dreamed of!

"I don't know the address," La Faloise resumed.

"She lives on a third floor in the Boulevard Haussmann, between the Rue de l'Arcade and the Rue Pesquier," said Georges all in a breath.

And when the other looked at him in much astonishment, he added, turning very red and fit to sink into the ground with embarrassment and conceit:

"I'm of the party. She invited me this morning."

But there was a great stir in the drawing room, and Vandeuvres and Fauchery could not continue pressing the count. The Marquis de Chouard had just come in, and everyone was anxious to greet him. He had moved painfully forward, his legs failing under him, and he now stood in the middle of the room with pallid face and eyes blinking, as though he had just come out of some dark alley and were blinded by the brightness of the lamps.

"I scarcely hoped to see you tonight, Father," said the countess. "I should have been anxious till the morning."

He looked at her without answering, as a man might who fails to understand. His nose, which loomed immense on his shorn face, looked like a swollen pimple, while his lower lip hung down. Seeing him such a wreck, Mme Hugon, full of kind compassion, said pitying things to him.

"You work too hard. You ought to rest yourself. At our age we ought to leave work to the young people."

"Work! Ah yes, to be sure, work!" he stammered at last. "Always plenty of work."

He began to pull himself together, straightening up his bent figure and passing his hand, as was his wont, over his scant gray hair, of which a few locks strayed behind his ears.

"At what are you working as late as this?" asked Mme du Joncquoy. "I thought you were at the financial minister's reception?"

But the countess intervened with:

"My father had to study the question of a projected law."

"Yes, a projected law," he said; "exactly so, a projected law. I shut myself up for that reason. It refers to work in factories, and I was anxious for a proper observance of the Lord's day of rest. It is really shameful that the government is unwilling to act with vigor in the matter. Churches are growing empty; we are running headlong to ruin."

Vandeuvres had exchanged glances with Fauchery. They both happened to be behind the marquis, and they were scanning him suspiciously. When Vandeuvres found an opportunity to take

him aside and to speak to him about the good-looking creature he was in the habit of taking down into the country, the old man affected extreme surprise. Perhaps someone had seen him with the Baroness Decker, at whose house at Viroflay he sometimes spent a day or so. Vandeuvres's sole vengeance was an abrupt question:

"Tell me, where have you been straying to? Your elbow is covered with cobwebs and plaster."

"My elbow," he muttered, slightly disturbed. "Yes indeed, it's true. A speck or two, I must have come in for them on my way down from my office."

Several people were taking their departure. It was close on midnight. Two footmen were noiselessly removing the empty cups and the plates with cakes. In front of the hearth the ladies had re-formed and, at the same time, narrowed their circle and were chatting more carelessly than before in the languid atmosphere peculiar to the close of a party. The very room was going to sleep, and slowly creeping shadows were cast by its walls. It was then Fauchery spoke of departure. Yet he once more forgot his intention at sight of the Countess Sabine. She was resting from her cares as hostess, and as she sat in her wonted seat, silent, her eyes fixed on a log which was turning into embers, her face appeared so white and so impassable that doubt again possessed him. In the glow of the fire the small black hairs on the mole at the corner of her lip became white. It was Nana's very mole, down to the color of the hair. He could not refrain from whispering something about it in Vandeuvres's ear. Gad, it was true; the other had never noticed it before. And both men continued this comparison of Nana and the countess. They discovered a vague resemblance about the chin and the mouth, but the eyes were not at all alike. Then, too, Nana had a good-natured expression, while with the countess it was hard to decide – she might have been a cat, sleeping with claws withdrawn and paws stirred by a scarce-perceptible nervous quiver.

"All the same, one could have her," declared Fauchery.

Vandeuvres stripped her at a glance.

"Yes, one could, all the same," he said. "But I think nothing of the thighs, you know. Will you bet she has no thighs?"

He stopped, for Fauchery touched him briskly on the arm and showed him Estelle, sitting close to them on her footstool. They had raised their voices without noticing her, and she must have overheard them. Nevertheless, she continued sitting there stiff and motionless, not a hair having lifted on her thin neck, which was that of a girl who has shot up all too quickly. Thereupon they retired three or four paces, and Vandeuvres vowed that the countess was a very honest woman. Just then voices were raised in front of the hearth. Mme du Joncquoy was saying:

"I was willing to grant you that Monsieur de Bismarck was perhaps a witty man. Only, if you go as far as to talk of genius – "

The ladies had come round again to their earliest topic of conversation.

"What the deuce! Still Monsieur de Bismarck!" muttered Fauchery. "This time I make my escape for good and all."

"Wait a bit," said Vandeuvres, "we must have a definite no from the count."

The Count Muffat was talking to his father-in-law and a certain serious-looking gentleman. Vandeuvres drew him away and renewed the invitation, backing it up with the information that he was to be at the supper himself. A man might go anywhere; no one could think of suspecting evil where at most there could only be curiosity. The count listened to these arguments with downcast eyes and expressionless face. Vandeuvres felt him to be hesitating when the Marquis de Chouard approached with a look of interrogation. And when the latter was informed of the question in hand and Fauchery had invited him in his turn, he looked at his son-in-law furtively. There ensued an embarrassed silence, but both men encouraged one another and would doubtless have ended by accepting had not Count Muffat perceived M. Venot's gaze fixed upon him. The little old man was no longer smiling; his face was cadaverous, his eyes bright and keen as steel.

"No," replied the count directly, in so decisive a tone that further insistence became impossible.

Then the marquis refused with even greater severity of expression. He talked morality. The aristocratic classes ought to set a good example. Fauchery smiled and shook hands with Vandeuvres. He did not wait for him and took his departure immediately, for he was due at his newspaper office.

"At Nana's at midnight, eh?"

La Faloise retired too. Steiner had made his bow to the countess. Other men followed them, and the same phrase went round – "At midnight, at Nana's" – as they went to get their overcoats in the anteroom. Georges, who could not leave without his mother, had stationed himself at the door, where he gave the exact address. "Third floor, door on your left." Yet before going out Fauchery gave a final glance. Vandeuvres had again resumed his position among the ladies and was laughing with Leonide de Chezelles. Count Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard were joining in the conversation, while the good Mme Hugon was falling asleep open-eyed. Lost among the petticoats, M. Venot was his own small self again and smiled as of old. Twelve struck slowly in the great solemn room.

"What – what do you mean?" Mme du Joncquoy resumed. "You imagine that Monsieur de Bismarck will make war on us and beat us! Oh, that's unbearable!"

Indeed, they were laughing round Mme Chantereau, who had just repeated an assertion she had heard made in Alsace, where her husband owned a foundry.

"We have the emperor, fortunately," said Count Muffat in his grave, official way.

It was the last phrase Fauchery was able to catch. He closed the door after casting one more glance in the direction of the Countess Sabine. She was talking sedately with the chief clerk and seemed to be interested in that stout individual's conversation. Assuredly he must have been deceiving himself. There was no "little rift" there at all. It was a pity.

"You're not coming down then?" La Faloise shouted up to him from the entrance hall.

And out on the pavement, as they separated, they once more repeated:

"Tomorrow, at Nana's."

CHAPTER IV

Since morning Zoe had delivered up the flat to a managing man who had come from Brebant's with a staff of helpers and waiters. Brebant was to supply everything, from the supper, the plates and dishes, the glass, the linen, the flowers, down to the seats and footstools. Nana could not have mustered a dozen napkins out of all her cupboards, and not having had time to get a proper outfit after her new start in life and scorning to go to the restaurant, she had decided to make the restaurant come to her. It struck her as being more the thing. She wanted to celebrate her great success as an actress with a supper which should set people talking. As her dining room was too small, the manager had arranged the table in the drawing room, a table with twenty-five covers, placed somewhat close together.

"Is everything ready?" asked Nana when she returned at midnight.

"Oh! I don't know," replied Zoe roughly, looking beside herself with worry. "The Lord be thanked, I don't bother about anything. They're making a fearful mess in the kitchen and all over the flat! I've had to fight my battles too. The other two came again. My eye! I did just chuck 'em out!"

She referred, of course, to her employer's old admirers, the tradesman and the Walachian, to whom Nana, sure of her future and longing to shed her skin, as she phrased it, had decided to give the go-by.

"There are a couple of leeches for you!" she muttered.

"If they come back threaten to go to the police."

Then she called Daguenet and Georges, who had remained behind in the anteroom, where they were hanging up their overcoats. They had both met at the stage door in the Passage des Panoramas, and she had brought them home with her in a cab. As there was nobody there yet, she shouted to them to come into the dressing room while Zoe was touching up her toilet. Hurriedly and without changing her dress she had her hair done up and stuck white roses in her chignon and at her bosom. The little room was littered with the drawing-room furniture, which the workmen had been compelled to roll in there, and it was full of a motley assemblage of round tables, sofas and armchairs, with their legs in air for the most part. Nana was quite ready when her dress caught on a castor and tore upward. At this she swore furiously; such things only happened to her! Ragingly she took off her dress, a very simple affair of white foulard, of so thin and supple a texture that it clung about her like a long shift. But she put it on again directly, for she could not find another to her taste, and with tears in her eyes declared that she was dressed like a ragpicker. Daguenet and Georges had to patch up the rent with pins, while Zoe once more arranged her hair. All three hurried round her, especially the boy, who knelt on the floor with his hands among her skirts. And at last she calmed down again when Daguenet assured her it could not be later than a quarter past twelve, seeing that by dint of scamping her words and skipping her lines she had effectually shortened the third act of the Blonde Venus.

"The play's still far too good for that crowd of idiots," she said. "Did you see? There were thousands there tonight. Zoe, my girl, you will wait in here. Don't go to bed, I shall want you. By gum, it is time they came. Here's company!"

She ran off while Georges stayed where he was with the skirts of his coat brushing the floor. He blushed, seeing Daguenet looking at him. Notwithstanding which, they had conceived a tender regard the one for the other. They rearranged the bows of their cravats in front of the big dressing glass and gave each other a mutual dose of the clothesbrush, for they were all white from their close contact with Nana.

"One would think it was sugar," murmured Georges, giggling like a greedy little child.

A footman hired for the evening was ushering the guests into the small drawing room, a narrow slip of a place in which only four armchairs had been left in order the better to pack in the company. From the large drawing room beyond came a sound as of the moving of plates and silver, while a clear

and brilliant ray of light shone from under the door. At her entrance Nana found Clarisse Besnus, whom La Faloise had brought, already installed in one of the armchairs.

"Dear me, you're the first of 'em!" said Nana, who, now that she was successful, treated her familiarly.

"Oh, it's his doing," replied Clarisse. "He's always afraid of not getting anywhere in time. If I'd taken him at his word I shouldn't have waited to take off my paint and my wig."

The young man, who now saw Nana for the first time, bowed, paid her a compliment and spoke of his cousin, hiding his agitation behind an exaggeration of politeness. But Nana, neither listening to him nor recognizing his face, shook hands with him and then went briskly toward Rose Mignon, with whom she at once assumed a most distinguished manner.

"Ah, how nice of you, my dear madame! I was so anxious to have you here!"

"It's I who am charmed, I assure you," said Rose with equal amiability.

"Pray, sit down. Do you require anything?"

"Thank you, no! Ah yes, I've left my fan in my pelisse, Steiner; just look in the right-hand pocket."

Steiner and Mignon had come in behind Rose. The banker turned back and reappeared with the fan while Mignon embraced Nana fraternally and forced Rose to do so also. Did they not all belong to the same family in the theatrical world? Then he winked as though to encourage Steiner, but the latter was disconcerted by Rose's clear gaze and contented himself by kissing Nana's hand.

Just then the Count de Vandeuvres made his appearance with Blanche de Sivry. There was an interchange of profound bows, and Nana with the utmost ceremony conducted Blanche to an armchair. Meanwhile Vandeuvres told them laughingly that Fauchery was engaged in a dispute at the foot of the stairs because the porter had refused to allow Lucy Stewart's carriage to come in at the gate. They could hear Lucy telling the porter he was a dirty blackguard in the anteroom. But when the footman had opened the door she came forward with her laughing grace of manner, announced her name herself, took both Nana's hands in hers and told her that she had liked her from the very first and considered her talent splendid. Nana, puffed up by her novel role of hostess, thanked her and was veritably confused. Nevertheless, from the moment of Fauchery's arrival she appeared preoccupied, and directly she could get near him she asked him in a low voice:

"Will he come?"

"No, he did not want to," was the journalist's abrupt reply, for he was taken by surprise, though he had got ready some sort of tale to explain Count Muffat's refusal.

Seeing the young woman's sudden pallor, he became conscious of his folly and tried to retract his words.

"He was unable to; he is taking the countess to the ball at the Ministry of the Interior tonight."

"All right," murmured Nana, who suspected him of ill will, "you'll pay me out for that, my pippin."

She turned on her heel, and so did he; they were angry. Just then Mignon was pushing Steiner up against Nana, and when Fauchery had left her he said to her in a low voice and with the good-natured cynicism of a comrade in arms who wishes his friends to be happy:

"He's dying of it, you know, only he's afraid of my wife. Won't you protect him?"

Nana did not appear to understand. She smiled and looked at Rose, the husband and the banker and finally said to the latter:

"Monsieur Steiner, you will sit next to me."

With that there came from the anteroom a sound of laughter and whispering and a burst of merry, chattering voices, which sounded as if a runaway convent were on the premises. And Labordette appeared, towing five women in his rear, his boarding school, as Lucy Stewart cruelly phrased it. There was Gaga, majestic in a blue velvet dress which was too tight for her, and Caroline Hequet, clad as usual in ribbed black silk, trimmed with Chantilly lace. Lea de Horn came next,

terribly dressed up, as her wont was, and after her the big Tatan Nene, a good-humored fair girl with the bosom of a wet nurse, at which people laughed, and finally little Maria Blond, a young damsel of fifteen, as thin and vicious as a street child, yet on the high road to success, owing to her recent first appearance at the Folies. Labordette had brought the whole collection in a single fly, and they were still laughing at the way they had been squeezed with Maria Blond on her knees. But on entering the room they pursed up their lips, and all grew very conventional as they shook hands and exchanged salutations. Gaga even affected the infantile and lisped through excess of genteel deportment. Tatan Nene alone transgressed. They had been telling her as they came along that six absolutely naked Negroes would serve up Nana's supper, and she now grew anxious about them and asked to see them. Labordette called her a goose and besought her to be silent.

"And Bordenave?" asked Fauchery.

"Oh, you may imagine how miserable I am," cried Nana; "he won't be able to join us."

"Yes," said Rose Mignon, "his foot caught in a trap door, and he's got a fearful sprain. If only you could hear him swearing, with his leg tied up and laid out on a chair!"

Thereupon everybody mourned over Bordenave's absence. No one ever gave a good supper without Bordenave. Ah well, they would try and do without him, and they were already talking about other matters when a burly voice was heard:

"What, eh, what? Is that the way they're going to write my obituary notice?"

There was a shout, and all heads were turned round, for it was indeed Bordenave. Huge and fiery-faced, he was standing with his stiff leg in the doorway, leaning for support on Simonne Cabiroche's shoulder. Simonne was for the time being his mistress. This little creature had had a certain amount of education and could play the piano and talk English. She was a blonde on a tiny, pretty scale and so delicately formed that she seemed to bend under Bordenave's rude weight. Yet she was smilingly submissive withal. He postured there for some moments, for he felt that together they formed a tableau.

"One can't help liking ye, eh?" he continued. "Zounds, I was afraid I should get bored, and I said to myself, 'Here goes.'"

But he interrupted himself with an oath.

"Oh, damn!"

Simonne had taken a step too quickly forward, and his foot had just felt his full weight. He gave her a rough push, but she, still smiling away and ducking her pretty head as some animal might that is afraid of a beating, held him up with all the strength a little plump blonde can command. Amid all these exclamations there was a rush to his assistance. Nana and Rose Mignon rolled up an armchair, into which Bordenave let himself sink, while the other women slid a second one under his leg. And with that all the actresses present kissed him as a matter of course. He kept grumbling and gasping.

"Oh, damn! Oh, damn! Ah well, the stomach's unhurt, you'll see."

Other guests had arrived by this time, and motion became impossible in the room. The noise of clinking plates and silver had ceased, and now a dispute was heard going on in the big drawing room, where the voice of the manager grumbled angrily. Nana was growing impatient, for she expected no more invited guests and wondered why they did not bring in supper. She had just sent Georges to find out what was going on when, to her great surprise, she noticed the arrival of more guests, both male and female. She did not know them in the least. Whereupon with some embarrassment she questioned Bordenave, Mignon and Labordette about them. They did not know them any more than she did, but when she turned to the Count de Vandeuvres he seemed suddenly to recollect himself. They were the young men he had pressed into her service at Count Muffat's. Nana thanked him. That was capital, capital! Only they would all be terribly crowded, and she begged Labordette to go and have seven more covers set. Scarcely had he left the room than the footman ushered in three newcomers. Nay, this time the thing was becoming ridiculous; one certainly could never take them all in. Nana was beginning to grow angry and in her haughtiest manner announced that such conduct

was scarcely in good taste. But seeing two more arrive, she began laughing; it was really too funny. So much the worse. People would have to fit in anyhow! The company were all on their feet save Gaga and Rose and Bordenave, who alone took up two armchairs. There was a buzz of voices, people talking in low tones and stifling slight yawns the while.

"Now what d'you say, my lass," asked Bordenave, "to our sitting down at table as if nothing had happened? We are all here, don't you think?"

"Oh yes, we're all here, I promise you!" she answered laughingly.

She looked round her but grew suddenly serious, as though she were surprised at not finding someone. Doubtless there was a guest missing whom she did not mention. It was a case of waiting. But a minute or two later the company noticed in their midst a tall gentleman with a fine face and a beautiful white beard. The most astonishing thing about it was that nobody had seen him come in; indeed, he must have slipped into the little drawing room through the bedroom door, which had remained ajar. Silence reigned, broken only by a sound of whispering. The Count de Vandeuvres certainly knew who the gentleman was, for they both exchanged a discreet handgrip, but to the questions which the women asked him he replied by a smile only. Thereupon Caroline Hequet wagered in a low voice that it was an English lord who was on the eve of returning to London to be married. She knew him quite well – she had had him. And this account of the matter went the round of the ladies present, Maria Blond alone asserting that, for her part, she recognized a German ambassador. She could prove it, because he often passed the night with one of her friends. Among the men his measure was taken in a few rapid phrases. A real swell, to judge by his looks! Perhaps he would pay for the supper! Most likely. It looked like it. Bah! Provided only the supper was a good one! In the end the company remained undecided. Nay, they were already beginning to forget the old white-bearded gentleman when the manager opened the door of the large drawing room.

"Supper is on the table, madame."

Nana had already accepted Steiner's proffered arm without noticing a movement on the part of the old gentleman, who started to walk behind her in solitary state. Thus the march past could not be organized, and men and women entered anyhow, joking with homely good humor over this absence of ceremony. A long table stretched from one end to the other of the great room, which had been entirely cleared of furniture, and this same table was not long enough, for the plates thereon were touching one another. Four candelabra, with ten candles apiece, lit up the supper, and of these one was gorgeous in silver plate with sheaves of flowers to right and left of it. Everything was luxurious after the restaurant fashion; the china was ornamented with a gold line and lacked the customary monogram; the silver had become worn and tarnished through dint of continual washings; the glass was of the kind that you can complete an odd set of in any cheap emporium.

The scene suggested a premature housewarming in an establishment newly smiled on by fortune and as yet lacking the necessary conveniences. There was no central luster, and the candelabra, whose tall tapers had scarcely burned up properly, cast a pale yellow light among the dishes and stands on which fruit, cakes and preserves alternated symmetrically.

"You sit where you like, you know," said Nana. "It's more amusing that way."

She remained standing midway down the side of the table. The old gentleman whom nobody knew had placed himself on her right, while she kept Steiner on her left hand. Some guests were already sitting down when the sound of oaths came from the little drawing room. It was Bordenave. The company had forgotten him, and he was having all the trouble in the world to raise himself out of his two armchairs, for he was howling amain and calling for that cat of a Simonne, who had slipped off with the rest. The women ran in to him, full of pity for his woes, and Bordenave appeared, supported, nay, almost carried, by Caroline, Clarisse, Tatan Nene and Maria Blond. And there was much to-do over his installation at the table.

"In the middle, facing Nana!" was the cry. "Bordenave in the middle! He'll be our president!"

Thereupon the ladies seated him in the middle. But he needed a second chair for his leg, and two girls lifted it up and stretched it carefully out. It wouldn't matter; he would eat sideways.

"God blast it all!" he grumbled. "We're squashed all the same! Ah, my kittens, Papa recommends himself to your tender care!"

He had Rose Mignon on his right and Lucy Stewart on his left hand, and they promised to take good care of him. Everybody was now getting settled. Count de Vandeuvres placed himself between Lucy and Clarisse; Fauchery between Rose Mignon and Caroline Hequet. On the other side of the table Hector de la Faloise had rushed to get next Gaga, and that despite the calls of Clarisse opposite, while Mignon, who never deserted Steiner, was only separated from him by Blanche and had Tatan Nene on his left. Then came Labordette and, finally, at the two ends of the table were irregular crowding groups of young men and of women, such as Simonne, Lea de Horn and Maria Blond. It was in this region that Daguenet and Georges forgathered more warmly than ever while smilingly gazing at Nana.

Nevertheless, two people remained standing, and there was much joking about it. The men offered seats on their knees. Clarisse, who could not move her elbows, told Vandeuvres that she counted on him to feed her. And then that Bordenave did just take up space with his chairs! There was a final effort, and at last everybody was seated, but, as Mignon loudly remarked, they were confoundedly like herrings in a barrel.

"Thick asparagus soup a la comtesse, clear soup a la Deslignac," murmured the waiters, carrying about platefuls in rear of the guests.

Bordenave was loudly recommending the thick soup when a shout arose, followed by protests and indignant exclamations. The door had just opened, and three late arrivals, a woman and two men, had just come in. Oh dear, no! There was no space for them! Nana, however, without leaving her chair, began screwing up her eyes in the effort to find out whether she knew them. The woman was Louise Violaine, but she had never seen the men before.

"This gentleman, my dear," said Vandeuvres, "is a friend of mine, a naval officer, Monsieur de Foucarmont by name. I invited him."

Foucarmont bowed and seemed very much at ease, for he added:

"And I took leave to bring one of my friends with me."

"Oh, it's quite right, quite right!" said Nana. "Sit down, pray. Let's see, you – Clarisse – push up a little. You're a good deal spread out down there. That's it – where there's a will – "

They crowded more tightly than ever, and Foucarmont and Louise were given a little stretch of table, but the friend had to sit at some distance from his plate and ate his supper through dint of making a long arm between his neighbors' shoulders. The waiters took away the soup plates and circulated rissoles of young rabbit with truffles and "niokys" and powdered cheese. Bordenave agitated the whole table with the announcement that at one moment he had had the idea of bringing with him Prulliere, Fontan and old Bosc. At this Nana looked sedate and remarked dryly that she would have given them a pretty reception. Had she wanted colleagues, she would certainly have undertaken to ask them herself. No, no, she wouldn't have third-rate play actors. Old Bosc was always drunk; Prulliere was fond of spitting too much, and as to Fontan, he made himself unbearable in society with his loud voice and his stupid doings. Then, you know, third-rate play actors were always out of place when they found themselves in the society of gentlemen such as those around her.

"Yes, yes, it's true," Mignon declared.

All round the table the gentlemen in question looked unimpeachable in the extreme, what with their evening dress and their pale features, the natural distinction of which was still further refined by fatigue. The old gentleman was as deliberate in his movements and wore as subtle a smile as though he were presiding over a diplomatic congress, and Vandeuvres, with his exquisite politeness toward the ladies next to him, seemed to be at one of the Countess Muffat's receptions. That very morning Nana had been remarking to her aunt that in the matter of men one could not have done better – they

were all either wellborn or wealthy, in fact, quite the thing. And as to the ladies, they were behaving admirably. Some of them, such as Blanche, Lea and Louise, had come in low dresses, but Gaga's only was perhaps a little too low, the more so because at her age she would have done well not to show her neck at all. Now that the company were finally settled the laughter and the light jests began to fail. Georges was under the impression that he had assisted at merrier dinner parties among the good folks of Orleans. There was scarcely any conversation. The men, not being mutually acquainted, stared at one another, while the women sat quite quiet, and it was this which especially surprised Georges. He thought them all smugs – he had been under the impression that everybody would begin kissing at once.

The third course, consisting of a Rhine carp a la Chambord and a saddle of venison a l'anglaise, was being served when Blanche remarked aloud:

"Lucy, my dear, I met your Ollivier on Sunday. How he's grown!"

"Dear me, yes! He's eighteen," replied Lucy. "It doesn't make me feel any younger. He went back to his school yesterday."

Her son Ollivier, whom she was wont to speak of with pride, was a pupil at the Ecole de Marine. Then ensued a conversation about the young people, during which all the ladies waxed very tender. Nana described her own great happiness. Her baby, the little Louis, she said, was now at the house of her aunt, who brought him round to her every morning at eleven o'clock, when she would take him into her bed, where he played with her griffon dog Lulu. It was enough to make one die of laughing to see them both burying themselves under the clothes at the bottom of the bed. The company had no idea how cunning Louiset had already become.

"Oh, yesterday I did just pass a day!" said Rose Mignon in her turn. "Just imagine, I went to fetch Charles and Henry at their boarding school, and I had positively to take them to the theater at night. They jumped; they clapped their little hands: 'We shall see Mamma act! We shall see Mamma act!' Oh, it was a to-do!"

Mignon smiled complaisantly, his eyes moist with paternal tenderness.

"And at the play itself," he continued, "they were so funny! They behaved as seriously as grown men, devoured Rose with their eyes and asked me why Mamma had her legs bare like that."

The whole table began laughing, and Mignon looked radiant, for his pride as a father was flattered. He adored his children and had but one object in life, which was to increase their fortunes by administering the money gained by Rose at the theater and elsewhere with the businesslike severity of a faithful steward. When as first fiddle in the music hall where she used to sing he had married her, they had been passionately fond of one another. Now they were good friends. There was an understanding between them: she labored hard to the full extent of her talent and of her beauty; he had given up his violin in order the better to watch over her successes as an actress and as a woman. One could not have found a more homely and united household anywhere!

"What age is your eldest?" asked Vandeuvres.

"Henry's nine," replied Mignon, "but such a big chap for his years!"

Then he chaffed Steiner, who was not fond of children, and with quiet audacity informed him that were he a father, he would make a less stupid hash of his fortune. While talking he watched the banker over Blanche's shoulders to see if it was coming off with Nana. But for some minutes Rose and Fauchery, who were talking very near him, had been getting on his nerves. Was Rose going to waste time over such a folly as that? In that sort of case, by Jove, he blocked the way. And diamond on finger and with his fine hands in great evidence, he finished discussing a fillet of venison.

Elsewhere the conversation about children continued. La Faloise, rendered very restless by the immediate proximity of Gaga, asked news of her daughter, whom he had had the pleasure of noticing in her company at the Varietes. Lili was quite well, but she was still such a tomboy! He was astonished to learn that Lili was entering on her nineteenth year. Gaga became even more imposing in his eyes, and when he endeavored to find out why she had not brought Lili with her:

"Oh no, no, never!" she said stiffly. "Not three months ago she positively insisted on leaving her boarding school. I was thinking of marrying her off at once, but she loves me so that I had to take her home – oh, so much against my will!"

Her blue eyelids with their blackened lashes blinked and wavered while she spoke of the business of settling her young lady. If at her time of life she hadn't laid by a sou but was still always working to minister to men's pleasures, especially those very young men, whose grandmother she might well be, it was truly because she considered a good match of far greater importance than mere savings. And with that she leaned over La Faloise, who reddened under the huge, naked, plastered shoulder with which she well-nigh crushed him.

"You know," she murmured, "if she fails it won't be my fault. But they're so strange when they're young!"

There was a considerable bustle round the table, and the waiters became very active. After the third course the entrees had made their appearance; they consisted of pullets a la marechale, fillets of sole with shallot sauce and escalopes of Strasbourg pate. The manager, who till then had been having Meursault served, now offered Chambertin and Leoville. Amid the slight hubbub which the change of plates involved Georges, who was growing momentarily more astonished, asked Daguenet if all the ladies present were similarly provided with children, and the other, who was amused by this question, gave him some further details. Lucy Stewart was the daughter of a man of English origin who greased the wheels of the trains at the Gare du Nord; she was thirty-nine years old and had the face of a horse but was adorable withal and, though consumptive, never died. In fact, she was the smartest woman there and represented three princes and a duke. Caroline Hequet, born at Bordeaux, daughter of a little clerk long since dead of shame, was lucky enough to be possessed of a mother with a head on her shoulders, who, after having cursed her, had made it up again at the end of a year of reflection, being minded, at any rate, to save a fortune for her daughter. The latter was twenty-five years old and very passionless and was held to be one of the finest women it is possible to enjoy. Her price never varied. The mother, a model of orderliness, kept the accounts and noted down receipts and expenditures with severe precision. She managed the whole household from some small lodging two stories above her daughter's, where, moreover, she had established a workroom for dressmaking and plain sewing. As to Blanche de Sivry, whose real name was Jacqueline Bandu, she hailed from a village near Amiens. Magnificent in person, stupid and untruthful in character, she gave herself out as the granddaughter of a general and never owned to her thirty-two summers. The Russians had a great taste for her, owing to her embonpoint. Then Daguenet added a rapid word or two about the rest. There was Clarisse Besnus, whom a lady had brought up from Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer in the capacity of maid while the lady's husband had started her in quite another line. There was Simonne Cabiroche, the daughter of a furniture dealer in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, who had been educated in a large boarding school with a view to becoming a governess. Finally there were Maria Blond and Louise Violaine and Lea de Horn, who had all shot up to woman's estate on the pavements of Paris, not to mention Tatan Nene, who had herded cows in Champagne till she was twenty.

Georges listened and looked at these ladies, feeling dizzy and excited by the coarse recital thus crudely whispered in his ear, while behind his chair the waiters kept repeating in respectful tones:

"Pullets a la marechale; fillets of sole with ravigote sauce."

"My dear fellow," said Daguenet, giving him the benefit of his experience, "don't take any fish; it'll do you no good at this time of night. And be content with Leoville: it's less treacherous."

A heavy warmth floated upward from the candelabras, from the dishes which were being handed round, from the whole table where thirty-eight human beings were suffocating. And the waiters forgot themselves and ran when crossing the carpet, so that it was spotted with grease. Nevertheless, the supper grew scarce any merrier. The ladies trifled with their meat, left half of it uneaten. Tatan Nene alone partook gluttonously of every dish. At that advanced hour of the night hunger was of the nervous order only, a mere whimsical craving born of an exasperated stomach.

At Nana's side the old gentleman refused every dish offered him; he had only taken a spoonful of soup, and he now sat in front of his empty plate, gazing silently about. There was some subdued yawning, and occasionally eyelids closed and faces became haggard and white. It was unutterably slow, as it always was, according to Vandeuvres's dictum. This sort of supper should be served anyhow if it was to be funny, he opined. Otherwise when elegantly and conventionally done you might as well feed in good society, where you were not more bored than here. Had it not been for Bordenave, who was still bawling away, everybody would have fallen asleep. That rum old buffer Bordenave, with his leg duly stretched on its chair, was letting his neighbors, Lucy and Rose, wait on him as though he were a sultan. They were entirely taken up with him, and they helped him and pampered him and watched over his glass and his plate, and yet that did not prevent his complaining.

"Who's going to cut up my meat for me? I can't; the table's a league away."

Every few seconds Simonne rose and took up a position behind his back in order to cut his meat and his bread. All the women took a great interest in the things he ate. The waiters were recalled, and he was stuffed to suffocation. Simonne having wiped his mouth for him while Rose and Lucy were changing his plate, her act struck him as very pretty and, deigning at length to show contentment:

"There, there, my daughter," he said, "that's as it should be. Women are made for that!"

There was a slight reawakening, and conversation became general as they finished discussing some orange sherbet. The hot roast was a fillet with truffles, and the cold roast a galantine of guinea fowl in jelly. Nana, annoyed by the want of go displayed by her guests, had begun talking with the greatest distinctness.

"You know the Prince of Scots has already had a stage box reserved so as to see the Blonde Venus when he comes to visit the exhibition."

"I very much hope that all the princes will come and see it," declared Bordenave with his mouth full.

"They are expecting the shah of Persia next Sunday," said Lucy Stewart. Whereupon Rose Mignon spoke of the shah's diamonds. He wore a tunic entirely covered with gems; it was a marvel, a flaming star; it represented millions. And the ladies, with pale faces and eyes glittering with covetousness, craned forward and ran over the names of the other kings, the other emperors, who were shortly expected. All of them were dreaming of some royal caprice, some night to be paid for by a fortune.

"Now tell me, dear boy," Caroline Hequet asked Vandeuvres, leaning forward as she did so, "how old's the emperor of Russia?"

"Oh, he's 'present time,'" replied the count, laughing. "Nothing to be done in that quarter, I warn you."

Nana made pretense of being hurt. The witticism appeared somewhat too stinging, and there was a murmur of protest. But Blanche gave a description of the king of Italy, whom she had once seen at Milan. He was scarcely good looking, and yet that did not prevent him enjoying all the women. She was put out somewhat when Fauchery assured her that Victor Emmanuel could not come to the exhibition. Louise Violaine and Lea favored the emperor of Austria, and all of a sudden little Maria Blond was heard saying:

"What an old stick the king of Prussia is! I was at Baden last year, and one was always meeting him about with Count Bismarck."

"Dear me, Bismarck!" Simonne interrupted. "I knew him once, I did. A charming man."

"That's what I was saying yesterday," cried Vandeuvres, "but nobody would believe me."

And just as at Countess Sabine's, there ensued a long discussion about Bismarck. Vandeuvres repeated the same phrases, and for a moment or two one was again in the Muffats' drawing room, the only difference being that the ladies were changed. Then, just as last night, they passed on to a discussion on music, after which, Foucarmont having let slip some mention of the assumption of the veil of which Paris was still talking, Nana grew quite interested and insisted on details about

Mlle de Fougeray. Oh, the poor child, fancy her burying herself alive like that! Ah well, when it was a question of vocation! All round the table the women expressed themselves much touched, and Georges, wearied at hearing these things a second time discussed, was beginning to ask Daguenet about Nana's ways in private life, when the conversation veered fatefully back to Count Bismarck. Tatan Nene bent toward Labordette to ask him privily who this Bismarck might be, for she did not know him. Whereupon Labordette, in cold blood, told her some portentous anecdotes. This Bismarck, he said, was in the habit of eating raw meat and when he met a woman near his den would carry her off thither on his back; at forty years of age he had already had as many as thirty-two children that way.

"Thirty-two children at forty!" cried Tatan Nene, stupefied and yet convinced. "He must be jolly well worn out for his age."

There was a burst of merriment, and it dawned on her that she was being made game of.

"You sillies! How am I to know if you're joking?"

Gaga, meanwhile, had stopped at the exhibition. Like all these ladies, she was delightedly preparing for the fray. A good season, provincials and foreigners rushing into Paris! In the long run, perhaps, after the close of the exhibition she would, if her business had flourished, be able to retire to a little house at Jouvisy, which she had long had her eye on.

"What's to be done?" she said to La Faloise. "One never gets what one wants! Oh, if only one were still really loved!"

Gaga behaved meltingly because she had felt the young man's knee gently placed against her own. He was blushing hotly and lisping as elegantly as ever. She weighed him at a glance. Not a very heavy little gentleman, to be sure, but then she wasn't hard to please. La Faloise obtained her address.

"Just look there," murmured Vandeuvres to Clarisse. "I think Gaga's doing you out of your Hector."

"A good riddance, so far as I'm concerned," replied the actress. "That fellow's an idiot. I've already chucked him downstairs three times. You know, I'm disgusted when dirty little boys run after old women."

She broke off and with a little gesture indicated Blanche, who from the commencement of dinner had remained in a most uncomfortable attitude, sitting up very markedly, with the intention of displaying her shoulders to the old distinguished-looking gentleman three seats beyond her.

"You're being left too," she resumed.

Vandeuvres smiled his thin smile and made a little movement to signify he did not care. Assuredly 'twas not he who would ever have prevented poor, dear Blanche scoring a success. He was more interested by the spectacle which Steiner was presenting to the table at large. The banker was noted for his sudden flames. That terrible German Jew who brewed money, whose hands forged millions, was wont to turn imbecile whenever he became enamored of a woman. He wanted them all too! Not one could make her appearance on the stage but he bought her, however expensive she might be. Vast sums were quoted. Twice had his furious appetite for courtesans ruined him. The courtesans, as Vandeuvres used to say, avenged public morality by emptying his moneybags. A big operation in the saltworks of the Landes had rendered him powerful on 'change, and so for six weeks past the Mignons had been getting a pretty slice out of those same saltworks. But people were beginning to lay wagers that the Mignons would not finish their slice, for Nana was showing her white teeth. Once again Steiner was in the toils, and so deeply this time that as he sat by Nana's side he seemed stunned; he ate without appetite; his lip hung down; his face was mottled. She had only to name a figure. Nevertheless, she did not hurry but continued playing with him, breathing her merry laughter into his hairy ear and enjoying the little convulsive movements which kept traversing his heavy face. There would always be time enough to patch all that up if that ninny of a Count Muffat were really to treat her as Joseph did Potiphar's wife.

"Leoville or Chambertin?" murmured a waiter, who came craning forward between Nana and Steiner just as the latter was addressing her in a low voice.

"Eh, what?" he stammered, losing his head. "Whatever you like – I don't care."

Vandeuvres gently nudged Lucy Stewart, who had a very spiteful tongue and a very fierce invention when once she was set going. That evening Mignon was driving her to exasperation.

"He would gladly be bottleholder, you know," she remarked to the count. "He's in hopes of repeating what he did with little Jonquier. You remember: Jonquier was Rose's man, but he was sweet on big Laure. Now Mignon procured Laure for Jonquier and then came back arm in arm with him to Rose, as if he were a husband who had been allowed a little peccadillo. But this time the thing's going to fail. Nana doesn't give up the men who are lent her."

"What ails Mignon that he should be looking at his wife in that severe way?" asked Vandeuvres.

He leaned forward and saw Rose growing exceedingly amorous toward Fauchery. This was the explanation of his neighbor's wrath. He resumed laughingly:

"The devil, are you jealous?"

"Jealous!" said Lucy in a fury. "Good gracious, if Rose is wanting Leon I give him up willingly – for what he's worth! That's to say, for a bouquet a week and the rest to match! Look here, my dear boy, these theatrical trollops are all made the same way. Why, Rose cried with rage when she read Leon's article on Nana; I know she did. So now, you understand, she must have an article, too, and she's gaining it. As for me, I'm going to chuck Leon downstairs – you'll see!"

She paused to say "Leoville" to the waiter standing behind her with his two bottles and then resumed in lowered tones:

"I don't want to shout; it isn't my style. But she's a cocky slut all the same. If I were in her husband's place I should lead her a lovely dance. Oh, she won't be very happy over it. She doesn't know my Fauchery: a dirty gent he is, too, palling up with women like that so as to get on in the world. Oh, a nice lot they are!"

Vandeuvres did his best to calm her down, but Bordenave, deserted by Rose and by Lucy, grew angry and cried out that they were letting Papa perish of hunger and thirst. This produced a fortunate diversion. Yet the supper was flagging; no one was eating now, though platefuls of cepes a' l'italienne and pineapple fritters a la Pompadour were being mangled. The champagne, however, which had been drunk ever since the soup course, was beginning little by little to warm the guests into a state of nervous exaltation. They ended by paying less attention to decorum than before. The women began leaning on their elbows amid the disordered table arrangements, while the men, in order to breathe more easily, pushed their chairs back, and soon the black coats appeared buried between the light-colored bodices, and bare shoulders, half turned toward the table, began to gleam as soft as silk. It was too hot, and the glare of the candles above the table grew ever yellower and duller. Now and again, when a women bent forward, the back of her neck glowed golden under a rain of curls, and the glitter of a diamond clasp lit up a lofty chignon. There was a touch of fire in the passing jests, in the laughing eyes, in the sudden gleam of white teeth, in the reflection of the candelabra on the surface of a glass of champagne. The company joked at the tops of their voices, gesticulated, asked questions which no one answered and called to one another across the whole length of the room. But the loudest din was made by the waiters; they fancied themselves at home in the corridors of their parent restaurant; they jostled one another and served the ices and the dessert to an accompaniment of guttural exclamations.

"My children," shouted Bordenave, "you know we're playing tomorrow. Be careful! Not too much champagne!"

"As far as I'm concerned," said Foucarmont, "I've drunk every imaginable kind of wine in all the four quarters of the globe. Extraordinary liquors some of 'em, containing alcohol enough to kill a corpse! Well, and what d'you think? Why, it never hurt me a bit. I can't make myself drunk. I've tried and I can't."

He was very pale, very calm and collected, and he lolled back in his chair, drinking without cessation.

"Never mind that," murmured Louise Violaine. "Leave off; you've had enough. It would be a funny business if I had to look after you the rest of the night."

Such was her state of exaltation that Lucy Stewart's cheeks were assuming a red, consumptive flush, while Rose Mignon with moist eyelids was growing excessively melting. Tatan Nene, greatly astonished at the thought that she had overeaten herself, was laughing vaguely over her own stupidity. The others, such as Blanche, Caroline, Simonne and Maria, were all talking at once and telling each other about their private affairs – about a dispute with a coachman, a projected picnic and innumerable complex stories of lovers stolen or restored. Meanwhile a young man near Georges, having evinced a desire to kiss Lea de Horn, received a sharp rap, accompanied by a "Look here, you, let me go!" which was spoken in a tone of fine indignation; and Georges, who was now very tipsy and greatly excited by the sight of Nana, hesitated about carrying out a project which he had been gravely maturing. He had been planning, indeed, to get under the table on all fours and to go and crouch at Nana's feet like a little dog. Nobody would have seen him, and he would have stayed there in the quietest way. But when at Lea's urgent request Daguenet had told the young man to sit still, Georges all at once felt grievously chagrined, as though the reproof had just been leveled at him. Oh, it was all silly and slow, and there was nothing worth living for! Daguenet, nevertheless, began chaffing and obliged him to swallow a big glassful of water, asking him at the same time what he would do if he were to find himself alone with a woman, seeing that three glasses of champagne were able to bowl him over.

"Why, in Havana," resumed Foucarmont, "they make a spirit with a certain wild berry; you think you're swallowing fire! Well now, one evening I drank more than a liter of it, and it didn't hurt me one bit. Better than that, another time when we were on the coast of Coromandel some savages gave us I don't know what sort of a mixture of pepper and vitriol, and that didn't hurt me one bit. I can't make myself drunk."

For some moments past La Faloise's face opposite had excited his displeasure. He began sneering and giving vent to disagreeable witticisms. La Faloise, whose brain was in a whirl, was behaving very restlessly and squeezing up against Gaga. But at length he became the victim of anxiety; somebody had just taken his handkerchief, and with drunken obstinacy he demanded it back again, asked his neighbors about it, stooped down in order to look under the chairs and the guests' feet. And when Gaga did her best to quiet him:

"It's a nuisance," he murmured, "my initials and my coronet are worked in the corner. They may compromise me."

"I say, Monsieur Falamoise, Lamafoise, Mafaloise!" shouted Foucarmont, who thought it exceedingly witty thus to disfigure the young man's name ad infinitum.

But La Faloise grew wroth and talked with a stutter about his ancestry. He threatened to send a water bottle at Foucarmont's head, and Count de Vandeuvres had to interfere in order to assure him that Foucarmont was a great joker. Indeed, everybody was laughing. This did for the already flurried young man, who was very glad to resume his seat and to begin eating with childlike submissiveness when in a loud voice his cousin ordered him to feed. Gaga had taken him back to her ample side; only from time to time he cast sly and anxious glances at the guests, for he ceased not to search for his handkerchief.

Then Foucarmont, being now in his witty vein, attacked Labordette right at the other end of the table. Louise Violaine strove to make him hold his tongue, for, she said, "when he goes nagging at other people like that it always ends in mischief for me." He had discovered a witticism which consisted in addressing Labordette as "Madame," and it must have amused him greatly, for he kept on repeating it while Labordette tranquilly shrugged his shoulders and as constantly replied:

"Pray hold your tongue, my dear fellow; it's stupid."

But as Foucarmont failed to desist and even became insulting without his neighbors knowing why, he left off answering him and appealed to Count Vandeuvres.

"Make your friend hold his tongue, monsieur. I don't wish to become angry."

Foucarmont had twice fought duels, and he was in consequence most politely treated and admitted into every circle. But there was now a general uprising against him. The table grew merry at his sallies, for they thought him very witty, but that was no reason why the evening should be spoiled. Vandeuvres, whose subtle countenance was darkening visibly, insisted on his restoring Labordette his sex. The other men – Mignon, Steiner and Bordenave – who were by this time much exalted, also intervened with shouts which drowned his voice. Only the old gentleman sitting forgotten next to Nana retained his stately demeanor and, still smiling in his tired, silent way, watched with lackluster eyes the untoward finish of the dessert.

"What do you say to our taking coffee in here, duckie?" said Bordenave. "We're very comfortable."

Nana did not give an immediate reply. Since the beginning of supper she had seemed no longer in her own house. All this company had overwhelmed and bewildered her with their shouts to the waiters, the loudness of their voices and the way in which they put themselves at their ease, just as though they were in a restaurant. Forgetting her role of hostess, she busied herself exclusively with bulky Steiner, who was verging on apoplexy beside her. She was listening to his proposals and continually refusing them with shakes of the head and that temptress's laughter which is peculiar to a voluptuous blonde. The champagne she had been drinking had flushed her a rosy-red; her lips were moist; her eyes sparkled, and the banker's offers rose with every kittenish movement of her shoulders, with every little voluptuous lift and fall of her throat, which occurred when she turned her head. Close by her ear he kept espying a sweet little satiny corner which drove him crazy. Occasionally Nana was interrupted, and then, remembering her guests, she would try and be as pleased as possible in order to show that she knew how to receive. Toward the end of the supper she was very tipsy. It made her miserable to think of it, but champagne had a way of intoxicating her almost directly! Then an exasperating notion struck her. In behaving thus improperly at her table, these ladies were showing themselves anxious to do her an ugly turn. Oh yes, she could see it all distinctly. Lucy had given Foucarmont a wink in order to egg him on against Labordette, while Rose, Caroline and the others were doing all they could to stir up the men. Now there was such a din you couldn't hear your neighbor speak, and so the story would get about that you might allow yourself every kind of liberty when you supped at Nana's. Very well then! They should see! She might be tipsy, if you like, but she was still the smartest and most ladylike woman there.

"Do tell them to serve the coffee here, duckie," resumed Bordenave. "I prefer it here because of my leg."

But Nana had sprung savagely to her feet after whispering into the astonished ears of Steiner and the old gentleman:

"It's quite right; it'll teach me to go and invite a dirty lot like that."

Then she pointed to the door of the dining room and added at the top of her voice:

"If you want coffee it's there, you know."

The company left the table and crowded toward the dining room without noticing Nana's indignant outburst. And soon no one was left in the drawing room save Bordenave, who advanced cautiously, supporting himself against the wall and cursing away at the confounded women who chucked Papa the moment they were chock-full. The waiters behind him were already busy removing the plates and dishes in obedience to the loudly voiced orders of the manager. They rushed to and fro, jostled one another, caused the whole table to vanish, as a pantomime property might at the sound of the chief scene-shifter's whistle. The ladies and gentlemen were to return to the drawing room after drinking their coffee.

"By gum, it's less hot here," said Gaga with a slight shiver as she entered the dining room.

The window here had remained open. Two lamps illuminated the table, where coffee and liqueurs were set out. There were no chairs, and the guests drank their coffee standing, while the hubbub the waiters were making in the next room grew louder and louder. Nana had disappeared,

but nobody fretted about her absence. They did without her excellently well, and everybody helped himself and rummaged in the drawers of the sideboard in search of teaspoons, which were lacking. Several groups were formed; people separated during supper rejoined each other, and there was an interchange of glances, of meaning laughter and of phrases which summed up recent situations.

"Ought not Monsieur Fauchery to come and lunch with us one of these days, Auguste?" said Rose Mignon.

Mignon, who was toying with his watch chain, eyed the journalist for a second or two with his severe glance. Rose was out of her senses. As became a good manager, he would put a stop to such spendthrift courses. In return for a notice, well and good, but afterward, decidedly not. Nevertheless, as he was fully aware of his wife's wrongheadedness and as he made it a rule to wink paternally at a folly now and again, when such was necessary, he answered amiably enough:

"Certainly, I shall be most happy. Pray come tomorrow, Monsieur Fauchery."

Lucy Stewart heard this invitation given while she was talking with Steiner and Blanche and, raising her voice, she remarked to the banker:

"It's a mania they've all of them got. One of them even went so far as to steal my dog. Now, dear boy, am I to blame if you chuck her?"

Rose turned round. She was very pale and gazed fixedly at Steiner as she sipped her coffee. And then all the concentrated anger she felt at his abandonment of her flamed out in her eyes. She saw more clearly than Mignon; it was stupid in him to have wished to begin the Jonquier ruse a second time – those dodgers never succeeded twice running. Well, so much the worse for him! She would have Fauchery! She had been getting enamored of him since the beginning of supper, and if Mignon was not pleased it would teach him greater wisdom!

"You are not going to fight?" said Vandeuvres, coming over to Lucy Stewart.

"No, don't be afraid of that! Only she must mind and keep quiet, or I let the cat out of the bag!"

Then signing imperiously to Fauchery:

"I've got your slippers at home, my little man. I'll get them taken to your porter's lodge for you tomorrow."

He wanted to joke about it, but she swept off, looking like a queen. Clarisse, who had propped herself against a wall in order to drink a quiet glass of kirsch, was seen to shrug her shoulders. A pleasant business for a man! Wasn't it true that the moment two women were together in the presence of their lovers their first idea was to do one another out of them? It was a law of nature! As to herself, why, in heaven's name, if she had wanted to she would have torn out Gaga's eyes on Hector's account! But la, she despised him! Then as La Faloise passed by, she contented herself by remarking to him:

"Listen, my friend, you like 'em well advanced, you do! You don't want 'em ripe; you want 'em mildewed!"

La Faloise seemed much annoyed and not a little anxious. Seeing Clarisse making game of him, he grew suspicious of her.

"No humbug, I say," he muttered. "You've taken my handkerchief. Well then, give it back!"

"He's dreeing us with that handkerchief of his!" she cried. "Why, you ass, why should I have taken it from you?"

"Why should you?" he said suspiciously. "Why, that you may send it to my people and compromise me."

In the meantime Foucarmont was diligently attacking the liqueurs. He continued to gaze sneeringly at Labordette, who was drinking his coffee in the midst of the ladies. And occasionally he gave vent to fragmentary assertions, as thus: "He's the son of a horse dealer; some say the illegitimate child of a countess. Never a penny of income, yet always got twenty-five louis in his pocket! Footboy to the ladies of the town! A big lubber, who never goes with any of 'em! Never, never, never!" he repeated, growing furious. "No, by Jove! I must box his ears."

He drained a glass of chartreuse. The chartreuse had not the slightest effect upon him; it didn't affect him "even to that extent," and he clicked his thumbnail against the edge of his teeth. But suddenly, just as he was advancing upon Labordette, he grew ashy white and fell down in a heap in front of the sideboard. He was dead drunk. Louise Violaine was beside herself. She had been quite right to prophesy that matters would end badly, and now she would have her work cut out for the remainder of the night. Gaga reassured her. She examined the officer with the eye of a woman of experience and declared that there was nothing much the matter and that the gentleman would sleep like that for at least a dozen or fifteen hours without any serious consequences. Foucarmont was carried off.

"Well, where's Nana gone to?" asked Vandeuvres.

Yes, she had certainly flown away somewhere on leaving the table. The company suddenly recollected her, and everybody asked for her. Steiner, who for some seconds had been uneasy on her account, asked Vandeuvres about the old gentleman, for he, too, had disappeared. But the count reassured him – he had just brought the old gentleman back. He was a stranger, whose name it was useless to mention. Suffice it to say that he was a very rich man who was quite pleased to pay for suppers! Then as Nana was once more being forgotten, Vandeuvres saw Daguenet looking out of an open door and beckoning to him. And in the bedroom he found the mistress of the house sitting up, white-lipped and rigid, while Daguenet and Georges stood gazing at her with an alarmed expression.

"What IS the matter with you?" he asked in some surprise.

She neither answered nor turned her head, and he repeated his question.

"Why, this is what's the matter with me," she cried out at length; "I won't let them make bloody sport of me!"

Thereupon she gave vent to any expression that occurred to her. Yes, oh yes, SHE wasn't a ninny – she could see clearly enough. They had been making devilish light of her during supper and saying all sorts of frightful things to show that they thought nothing of her! A pack of sluts who weren't fit to black her boots! Catch her bothering herself again just to be badgered for it after! She really didn't know what kept her from chucking all that dirty lot out of the house! And with this, rage choked her and her voice broke down in sobs.

"Come, come, my lass, you're drunk," said Vandeuvres, growing familiar. "You must be reasonable."

No, she would give her refusal now; she would stay where she was.

"I am drunk – it's quite likely! But I want people to respect me!"

For a quarter of an hour past Daguenet and Georges had been vainly beseeching her to return to the drawing room. She was obstinate, however; her guests might do what they liked; she despised them too much to come back among them.

No, she never would, never. They might tear her in pieces before she would leave her room!

"I ought to have had my suspicions," she resumed.

"It's that cat of a Rose who's got the plot up! I'm certain Rose'll have stopped that respectable woman coming whom I was expecting tonight."

She referred to Mme Robert. Vandeuvres gave her his word of honor that Mme Robert had given a spontaneous refusal. He listened and he argued with much gravity, for he was well accustomed to similar scenes and knew how women in such a state ought to be treated. But the moment he tried to take hold of her hands in order to lift her up from her chair and draw her away with him she struggled free of his clasp, and her wrath redoubled. Now, just look at that! They would never get her to believe that Fauchery had not put the Count Muffat off coming! A regular snake was that Fauchery, an envious sort, a fellow capable of growing mad against a woman and of destroying her whole happiness. For she knew this – the count had become madly devoted to her! She could have had him!

"Him, my dear, never!" cried Vandeuvres, forgetting himself and laughing loud.

"Why not?" she asked, looking serious and slightly sobered.

"Because he's thoroughly in the hands of the priests, and if he were only to touch you with the tips of his fingers he would go and confess it the day after. Now listen to a bit of good advice. Don't let the other man escape you!"

She was silent and thoughtful for a moment or two. Then she got up and went and bathed her eyes. Yet when they wanted to take her into the dining room she still shouted "No!" furiously. Vandeuvres left the bedroom, smiling and without further pressing her, and the moment he was gone she had an access of melting tenderness, threw herself into Daguenet's arms and cried out:

"Ah, my sweetie, there's only you in the world. I love you! YES, I love you from the bottom of my heart! Oh, it would be too nice if we could always live together. My God! How unfortunate women are!"

Then her eye fell upon Georges, who, seeing them kiss, was growing very red, and she kissed him too. Sweetie could not be jealous of a baby! She wanted Paul and Georges always to agree, because it would be so nice for them all three to stay like that, knowing all the time that they loved one another very much. But an extraordinary noise disturbed them: someone was snoring in the room. Whereupon after some searching they perceived Bordenave, who, since taking his coffee, must have comfortably installed himself there. He was sleeping on two chairs, his head propped on the edge of the bed and his leg stretched out in front. Nana thought him so funny with his open mouth and his nose moving with each successive snore that she was shaken with a mad fit of laughter. She left the room, followed by Daguenet and Georges, crossed the dining room, entered the drawing room, her merriment increasing at every step.

"Oh, my dear, you've no idea!" she cried, almost throwing herself into Rose's arms. "Come and see it."

All the women had to follow her. She took their hands coaxingly and drew them along with her willy-nilly, accompanying her action with so frank an outburst of mirth that they all of them began laughing on trust. The band vanished and returned after standing breathlessly for a second or two round Bordenave's lordly, outstretched form. And then there was a burst of laughter, and when one of them told the rest to be quiet Bordenave's distant snorings became audible.

It was close on four o'clock. In the dining room a card table had just been set out, at which Vandeuvres, Steiner, Mignon and Labordette had taken their seats. Behind them Lucy and Caroline stood making bets, while Blanche, nodding with sleep and dissatisfied about her night, kept asking Vandeuvres at intervals of five minutes if they weren't going soon. In the drawing room there was an attempt at dancing. Daguenet was at the piano or "chest of drawers," as Nana called it. She did not want a "thumper," for Mimi would play as many waltzes and polkas as the company desired. But the dance was languishing, and the ladies were chatting drowsily together in the corners of sofas. Suddenly, however, there was an outburst of noise. A band of eleven young men had arrived and were laughing loudly in the anteroom and crowding to the drawing room. They had just come from the ball at the Ministry of the Interior and were in evening dress and wore various unknown orders. Nana was annoyed at this riotous entry, called to the waiters who still remained in the kitchen and ordered them to throw these individuals out of doors. She vowed that she had never seen any of them before. Fauchery, Labordette, Daguenet and the rest of the men had all come forward in order to enforce respectful behavior toward their hostess. Big words flew about; arms were outstretched, and for some seconds a general exchange of fisticuffs was imminent. Notwithstanding this, however, a little sickly looking light-haired man kept insistently repeating:

"Come, come, Nana, you saw us the other evening at Peters' in the great red saloon! Pray remember, you invited us."

The other evening at Peters'? She did not remember it all. To begin with, what evening?

And when the little light-haired man had mentioned the day, which was Wednesday, she distinctly remembered having supped at Peters' on the Wednesday, but she had given no invitation to anyone; she was almost sure of that.

"However, suppose you HAVE invited them, my good girl," murmured Labordette, who was beginning to have his doubts. "Perhaps you were a little elevated."

Then Nana fell a-laughing. It was quite possible; she really didn't know. So then, since these gentlemen were on the spot, they had her leave to come in. Everything was quietly arranged; several of the newcomers found friends in the drawing room, and the scene ended in handshakings. The little sickly looking light-haired man bore one of the greatest names in France. Furthermore, the eleven announced that others were to follow them, and, in fact, the door opened every few moments, and men in white gloves and official garb presented themselves. They were still coming from the ball at the Ministry. Fauchery jestingly inquired whether the minister was not coming, too, but Nana answered in a huff that the minister went to the houses of people she didn't care a pin for. What she did not say was that she was possessed with a hope of seeing Count Muffat enter her room among all that stream of people. He might quite have reconsidered his decision, and so while talking to Rose she kept a sharp eye on the door.

Five o'clock struck. The dancing had ceased, and the cardplayers alone persisted in their game. Labordette had vacated his seat, and the women had returned into the drawing room. The air there was heavy with the somnolence which accompanies a long vigil, and the lamps cast a wavering light while their burned-out wicks glowed red within their globes. The ladies had reached that vaguely melancholy hour when they felt it necessary to tell each other their histories. Blanche de Sivry spoke of her grandfather, the general, while Clarisse invented a romantic story about a duke seducing her at her uncle's house, whither he used to come for the boar hunting. Both women, looking different ways, kept shrugging their shoulders and asking themselves how the deuce the other could tell such whoppers! As to Lucy Stewart, she quietly confessed to her origin and of her own accord spoke of her childhood and of the days when her father, the wheel greaser at the Northern Railway Terminus, used to treat her to an apple puff on Sundays.

"Oh, I must tell you about it!" cried the little Maria Blond abruptly. "Opposite to me there lives a gentleman, a Russian, an awfully rich man! Well, just fancy, yesterday I received a basket of fruit – oh, it just was a basket! Enormous peaches, grapes as big as that, simply wonderful for the time of year! And in the middle of them six thousand-franc notes! It was the Russian's doing. Of course I sent the whole thing back again, but I must say my heart ached a little – when I thought of the fruit!"

The ladies looked at one another and pursed up their lips. At her age little Maria Blond had a pretty cheek! Besides, to think that such things should happen to trollops like her! Infinite was their contempt for her among themselves. It was Lucy of whom they were particularly jealous, for they were beside themselves at the thought of her three princes. Since Lucy had begun taking a daily morning ride in the Bois they all had become Amazons, as though a mania possessed them.

Day was about to dawn, and Nana turned her eyes away from the door, for she was relinquishing all hope. The company were bored to distraction. Rose Mignon had refused to sing the "Slipper" and sat huddled up on a sofa, chatting in a low voice with Fauchery and waiting for Mignon, who had by now won some fifty louis from Vandeuvres. A fat gentleman with a decoration and a serious cast of countenance had certainly given a recitation in Alsatian accents of "Abraham's Sacrifice," a piece in which the Almighty says, "By My blasted Name" when He swears, and Isaac always answers with a "Yes, Papa!" Nobody, however, understood what it was all about, and the piece had been voted stupid. People were at their wits' end how to make merry and to finish the night with fitting hilarity. For a moment or two Labordette conceived the idea of denouncing different women in a whisper to La Faloise, who still went prowling round each individual lady, looking to see if she were hiding his handkerchief in her bosom. Soon, as there were still some bottles of champagne on the sideboard, the young men again fell to drinking. They shouted to one another; they stirred each other up, but a

dreary species of intoxication, which was stupid enough to drive one to despair, began to overcome the company beyond hope of recovery. Then the little fair-haired fellow, the man who bore one of the greatest names in France and had reached his wit's end and was desperate at the thought that he could not hit upon something really funny, conceived a brilliant notion: he snatched up his bottle of champagne and poured its contents into the piano. His allies were convulsed with laughter.

"La now! Why's he putting champagne into the piano?" asked Tatan Nene in great astonishment as she caught sight of him.

"What, my lass, you don't know why he's doing that?" replied Labordette solemnly. "There's nothing so good as champagne for pianos. It gives 'em tone."

"Ah," murmured Tatan Nene with conviction.

And when the rest began laughing at her she grew angry. How should she know? They were always confusing her.

Decidedly the evening was becoming a big failure. The night threatened to end in the unloveliest way. In a corner by themselves Maria Blond and Lea de Horn had begun squabbling at close quarters, the former accusing the latter of consorting with people of insufficient wealth. They were getting vastly abusive over it, their chief stumbling block being the good looks of the men in question. Lucy, who was plain, got them to hold their tongues. Good looks were nothing, according to her; good figures were what was wanted. Farther off, on a sofa, an attache had slipped his arm round Simonne's waist and was trying to kiss her neck, but Simonne, sullen and thoroughly out of sorts, pushed him away at every fresh attempt with cries of "You're pestering me!" and sound slaps of the fan across his face. For the matter of that, not one of the ladies allowed herself to be touched. Did people take them for light women? Gaga, in the meantime, had once more caught La Faloise and had almost hoisted him upon her knees while Clarisse was disappearing from view between two gentlemen, shaking with nervous laughter as women will when they are tickled. Round about the piano they were still busy with their little game, for they were suffering from a fit of stupid imbecility, which caused each man to jostle his fellow in his frantic desire to empty his bottle into the instrument. It was a simple process and a charming one.

"Now then, old boy, drink a glass! Devil take it, he's a thirsty piano! Hi! 'Tenshun! Here's another bottle! You mustn't lose a drop!"

Nana's back was turned, and she did not see them. Emphatically she was now falling back on the bulky Steiner, who was seated next to her. So much the worse! It was all on account of that Muffat, who had refused what was offered him. Sitting there in her white foulard dress, which was as light and full of folds as a shift, sitting there with drooped eyelids and cheeks pale with the touch of intoxication from which she was suffering, she offered herself to him with that quiet expression which is peculiar to a good-natured courtesan. The roses in her hair and at her throat had lost their leaves, and their stalks alone remained. Presently Steiner withdrew his hand quickly from the folds of her skirt, where he had come in contact with the pins that Georges had stuck there. Some drops of blood appeared on his fingers, and one fell on Nana's dress and stained it.

"Now the bargain's struck," said Nana gravely.

The day was breaking apace. An uncertain glimmer of light, fraught with a poignant melancholy, came stealing through the windows. And with that the guests began to take their departure. It was a most sour and uncomfortable retreat. Caroline Hequet, annoyed at the loss of her night, announced that it was high time to be off unless you were anxious to assist at some pretty scenes. Rose pouted as if her womanly character had been compromised. It was always so with these girls; they didn't know how to behave and were guilty of disgusting conduct when they made their first appearance in society! And Mignon having cleaned Vandeuvres out completely, the family took their departure. They did not trouble about Steiner but renewed their invitation for tomorrow to Fauchery. Lucy thereupon refused the journalist's escort home and sent him back shrilly to his "strolling actress." At this Rose turned round immediately and hissed out a "Dirty sow" by way of

answer. But Mignon, who in feminine quarrels was always paternal, for his experience was a long one and rendered him superior to them, had already pushed her out of the house, telling her at the same time to have done. Lucy came downstairs in solitary state behind them. After which Gaga had to carry off La Faloise, ill, sobbing like a child, calling after Clarisse, who had long since gone off with her two gentlemen. Simonne, too, had vanished. Indeed, none remained save Tatan, Lea and Maria, whom Labordette complaisantly took under his charge.

"Oh, but I don't the least bit want to go to bed!" said Nana. "One ought to find something to do."

She looked at the sky through the windowpanes. It was a livid sky, and sooty clouds were scudding across it. It was six o'clock in the morning. Over the way, on the opposite side of the Boulevard Haussmann, the glistening roofs of the still-slumbering houses were sharply outlined against the twilight sky while along the deserted roadway a gang of street sweepers passed with a clatter of wooden shoes. As she viewed Paris thus grimly awakening, she was overcome by tender, girlish feelings, by a yearning for the country, for idyllic scenes, for things soft and white.

"Now guess what you're to do," she said, coming back to Steiner. "You're going to take me to the Bois de Boulogne, and we'll drink milk there."

She clapped her hands in childish glee. Without waiting for the banker's reply – he naturally consented, though he was really rather bored and inclined to think of other things – she ran off to throw a pelisse over her shoulders. In the drawing room there was now no one with Steiner save the band of young men. These had by this time dropped the very dregs of their glasses into the piano and were talking of going, when one of their number ran in triumphantly. He held in his hands a last remaining bottle, which he had brought back with him from the pantry.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" he shouted. "Here's a bottle of chartreuse; that'll pick him up! And now, my young friends, let's hook it. We're blooming idiots."

In the dressing room Nana was compelled to wake up Zoe, who had dozed off on a chair. The gas was still alight, and Zoe shivered as she helped her mistress on with her hat and pelisse.

"Well, it's over; I've done what you wanted me to," said Nana, speaking familiarly to the maid in a sudden burst of expansive confidence and much relieved at the thought that she had at last made her election. "You were quite right; the banker's as good as another."

The maid was cross, for she was still heavy with sleep. She grumbled something to the effect that Madame ought to have come to a decision the first evening. Then following her into the bedroom, she asked what she was going to do with "those two," meaning Bordenave, who was snoring away as usual, and Georges, who had slipped in slyly, buried his head in a pillow and, finally falling asleep there, was now breathing as lightly and regularly as a cherub. Nana in reply told her that she was to let them sleep on. But seeing Daguenet come into the room, she again grew tender. He had been watching her from the kitchen and was looking very wretched.

"Come, my sweetie, be reasonable," she said, taking him in her arms and kissing him with all sorts of little wheedling caresses. "Nothing's changed; you know that it's sweetie whom I always adore! Eh, dear? I had to do it. Why, I swear to you we shall have even nicer times now. Come tomorrow, and we'll arrange about hours. Now be quick, kiss and hug me as you love me. Oh, tighter, tighter than that!"

And she escaped and rejoined Steiner, feeling happy and once more possessed with the idea of drinking milk. In the empty room the Count de Vandeuvres was left alone with the "decorated" man who had recited "Abraham's Sacrifice." Both seemed glued to the card table; they had lost count of their whereabouts and never once noticed the broad light of day without, while Blanche had made bold to put her feet up on a sofa in order to try and get a little sleep.

"Oh, Blanche is with them!" cried Nana. "We are going to drink milk, dear. Do come; you'll find Vandeuvres here when we return."

Blanche got up lazily. This time the banker's fiery face grew white with annoyance at the idea of having to take that big wench with him too. She was certain to bore him. But the two women had already got him by the arms and were reiterating:

"We want them to milk the cow before our eyes, you know."

CHAPTER V

At the Varietes they were giving the thirty-fourth performance of the Blonde Venus. The first act had just finished, and in the greenroom Simonne, dressed as the little laundress, was standing in front of a console table, surmounted by a looking glass and situated between the two corner doors which opened obliquely on the end of the dressing-room passage. No one was with her, and she was scrutinizing her face and rubbing her finger up and down below her eyes with a view to putting the finishing touches to her make-up. The gas jets on either side of the mirror flooded her with warm, crude light.

"Has he arrived?" asked Prulliere, entering the room in his Alpine admiral's costume, which was set off by a big sword, enormous top boots and a vast tuft of plumes.

"Who d'you mean?" said Simonne, taking no notice of him and laughing into the mirror in order to see how her lips looked.

"The prince."

"I don't know; I've just come down. Oh, he's certainly due here tonight; he comes every time!"

Prulliere had drawn near the hearth opposite the console table, where a coke fire was blazing and two more gas jets were flaring brightly. He lifted his eyes and looked at the clock and the barometer on his right hand and on his left. They had gilded sphinxes by way of adornment in the style of the First Empire. Then he stretched himself out in a huge armchair with ears, the green velvet of which had been so worn by four generations of comedians that it looked yellow in places, and there he stayed, with moveless limbs and vacant eyes, in that weary and resigned attitude peculiar to actors who are used to long waits before their turn for going on the stage.

Old Bosc, too, had just made his appearance. He came in dragging one foot behind the other and coughing. He was wrapped in an old box coat, part of which had slipped from his shoulder in such a way as to uncover the gold-laced cloak of King Dagobert. He put his crown on the piano and for a moment or two stood moodily stamping his feet. His hands were trembling slightly with the first beginnings of alcoholism, but he looked a sterling old fellow for all that, and a long white beard lent that fiery tippler's face of his a truly venerable appearance. Then in the silence of the room, while the shower of hail was whipping the panes of the great window that looked out on the courtyard, he shook himself disgustedly.

"What filthy weather!" he growled.

Simonne and Prulliere did not move. Four or five pictures – a landscape, a portrait of the actor Vernet – hung yellowing in the hot glare of the gas, and a bust of Potier, one of the bygone glories of the Varietes, stood gazing vacant-eyed from its pedestal. But just then there was a burst of voices outside. It was Fontan, dressed for the second act. He was a young dandy, and his habiliments, even to his gloves, were entirely yellow.

"Now say you don't know!" he shouted, gesticulating. "Today's my patron saint's day!"

"What?" asked Simonne, coming up smilingly, as though attracted by the huge nose and the vast, comic mouth of the man. "D'you answer to the name of Achille?"

"Exactly so! And I'm going to get 'em to tell Madame Bron to send up champagne after the second act."

For some seconds a bell had been ringing in the distance. The long-drawn sound grew fainter, then louder, and when the bell ceased a shout ran up the stair and down it till it was lost along the passages. "All on the stage for the second act! All on the stage for the second act!" The sound drew near, and a little pale-faced man passed by the greenroom doors, outside each of which he yelled at the top of his shrill voice, "On the stage for the second act!"

"The deuce, it's champagne!" said Prulliere without appearing to hear the din. "You're prospering!"

"If I were you I should have it in from the cafe," old Bosc slowly announced. He was sitting on a bench covered with green velvet, with his head against the wall.

But Simonne said that it was one's duty to consider Mme Bron's small perquisites. She clapped her hands excitedly and devoured Fontan with her gaze while his long goatlike visage kept up a continuous twitching of eyes and nose and mouth.

"Oh, that Fontan!" she murmured. "There's no one like him, no one like him!"

The two greenroom doors stood wide open to the corridor leading to the wings. And along the yellow wall, which was brightly lit up by a gas lamp out of view, passed a string of rapidly moving shadows – men in costume, women with shawls over their scant attire, in a word, the whole of the characters in the second act, who would shortly make their appearance as masqeuraders in the ball at the Boule Noire. And at the end of the corridor became audible a shuffling of feet as these people clattered down the five wooden steps which led to the stage. As the big Clarisse went running by Simonne called to her, but she said she would be back directly. And, indeed, she reappeared almost at once, shivering in the thin tunic and scarf which she wore as Iris.

"God bless me!" she said. "It isn't warm, and I've left my furs in my dressing room!"

Then as she stood toasting her legs in their warm rose-colored tights in front of the fireplace she resumed:

"The prince has arrived."

"Oh!" cried the rest with the utmost curiosity.

"Yes, that's why I ran down: I wanted to see. He's in the first stage box to the right, the same he was in on Thursday. It's the third time he's been this week, eh? That's Nana; well, she's in luck's way! I was willing to wager he wouldn't come again."

Simonne opened her lips to speak, but her remarks were drowned by a fresh shout which arose close to the greenroom. In the passage the callboy was yelling at the top of his shrill voice, "They've knocked!"

"Three times!" said Simonne when she was again able to speak. "It's getting exciting. You know, he won't go to her place; he takes her to his. And it seems that he has to pay for it too!"

"Egad! It's a case of when one 'has to go out,'" muttered Prulliere wickedly, and he got up to have a last look at the mirror as became a handsome fellow whom the boxes adored.

"They've knocked! They've knocked!" the callboy kept repeating in tones that died gradually away in the distance as he passed through the various stories and corridors.

Fontan thereupon, knowing how it had all gone off on the first occasion the prince and Nana met, told the two women the whole story while they in their turn crowded against him and laughed at the tops of their voices whenever he stooped to whisper certain details in their ears. Old Bosc had never budged an inch – he was totally indifferent. That sort of thing no longer interested him now. He was stroking a great tortoise-shell cat which was lying curled up on the bench. He did so quite beautifully and ended by taking her in his arms with the tender good nature becoming a worn-out monarch. The cat arched its back and then, after a prolonged sniff at the big white beard, the gluey odor of which doubtless disgusted her, she turned and, curling herself up, went to sleep again on the bench beside him. Bosc remained grave and absorbed.

"That's all right, but if I were you I should drink the champagne at the restaurant – its better there," he said, suddenly addressing Fontan when he had finished his recital.

"The curtain's up!" cried the callboy in cracked and long-drawn accents "The curtain's up! The curtain's up!"

The shout sounded for some moments, during which there had been a noise of rapid footsteps. Through the suddenly opened door of the passage came a burst of music and a far-off murmur of voices, and then the door shut to again and you could hear its dull thud as it wedged itself into position once more.

A heavy, peaceful, atmosphere again pervaded the greenroom, as though the place were situated a hundred leagues from the house where crowds were applauding. Simonne and Clarisse were still on the topic of Nana. There was a girl who never hurried herself! Why, yesterday she had again come on too late! But there was a silence, for a tall damsel had just craned her head in at the door and, seeing that she had made a mistake, had departed to the other end of the passage. It was Satin. Wearing a hat and a small veil for the nonce she was affecting the manner of a lady about to pay a call.

"A pretty trollop!" muttered Prulliere, who had been coming across her for a year past at the Cafe des Varietes. And at this Simonne told them how Nana had recognized in Satin an old schoolmate, had taken a vast fancy to her and was now plaguing Bordenave to let her make a first appearance on the stage.

"How d'ye do?" said Fontan, shaking hands with Mignon and Fauchery, who now came into the room.

Old Bosc himself gave them the tips of his fingers while the two women kissed Mignon.

"A good house this evening?" queried Fauchery.

"Oh, a splendid one!" replied Prulliere. "You should see 'em gaping."

"I say, my little dears," remarked Mignon, "it must be your turn!"

Oh, all in good time! They were only at the fourth scene as yet, but Bosc got up in obedience to instinct, as became a rattling old actor who felt that his cue was coming. At that very moment the callboy was opening the door.

"Monsieur Bosc!" he called. "Mademoiselle Simonne!"

Simonne flung a fur-lined pelisse briskly over her shoulders and went out. Bosc, without hurrying at all, went and got his crown, which he settled on his brow with a rap. Then dragging himself unsteadily along in his greatcoat, he took his departure, grumbling and looking as annoyed as a man who has been rudely disturbed.

"You were very amiable in your last notice," continued Fontan, addressing Fauchery. "Only why do you say that comedians are vain?"

"Yes, my little man, why d'you say that?" shouted Mignon, bringing down his huge hands on the journalist's slender shoulders with such force as almost to double him up.

Prulliere and Clarisse refrained from laughing aloud. For some time past the whole company had been deriving amusement from a comedy which was going on in the wings. Mignon, rendered frantic by his wife's caprice and annoyed at the thought that this man Fauchery brought nothing but a certain doubtful notoriety to his household, had conceived the idea of revenging himself on the journalist by overwhelming him with tokens of friendship. Every evening, therefore, when he met him behind scenes he would shower friendly slaps on his back and shoulders, as though fairly carried away by an outburst of tenderness, and Fauchery, who was a frail, small man in comparison with such a giant, was fain to take the raps with a strained smile in order not to quarrel with Rose's husband.

"Aha, my buck, you've insulted Fontan," resumed Mignon, who was doing his best to force the joke. "Stand on guard! One – two – got him right in the middle of his chest!"

He lunged and struck the young man with such force that the latter grew very pale and could not speak for some seconds. With a wink Clarisse showed the others where Rose Mignon was standing on the threshold of the greenroom. Rose had witnessed the scene, and she marched straight up to the journalist, as though she had failed to notice her husband and, standing on tiptoe, bare-armed and in baby costume, she held her face up to him with a caressing, infantine pout.

"Good evening, baby," said Fauchery, kissing her familiarly.

Thus he indemnified himself. Mignon, however, did not seem to have observed this kiss, for everybody kissed his wife at the theater. But he laughed and gave the journalist a keen little look. The latter would assurely have to pay for Rose's bravado.

In the passage the tightly shutting door opened and closed again, and a tempest of applause was blown as far as the greenroom. Simonne came in after her scene.

"Oh, Father Bosc HAS just scored!" she cried. "The prince was writhing with laughter and applauded with the rest as though he had been paid to. I say, do you know the big man sitting beside the prince in the stage box? A handsome man, with a very sedate expression and splendid whiskers!"

"It's Count Muffat," replied Fauchery. "I know that the prince, when he was at the empress's the day before yesterday, invited him to dinner for tonight. He'll have corrupted him afterward!"

"So that's Count Muffat! We know his father-in-law, eh, Auguste?" said Rose, addressing her remark to Mignon. "You know the Marquis de Chouard, at whose place I went to sing? Well, he's in the house too. I noticed him at the back of a box. There's an old boy for you!"

Prulliere, who had just put on his huge plume of feathers, turned round and called her.

"Hi, Rose! Let's go now!"

She ran after him, leaving her sentence unfinished. At that moment Mme Bron, the portress of the theater, passed by the door with an immense bouquet in her arms. Simonne asked cheerfully if it was for her, but the porter woman did not vouchsafe an answer and only pointed her chin toward Nana's dressing room at the end of the passage. Oh, that Nana! They were loading her with flowers! Then when Mme Bron returned she handed a letter to Clarisse, who allowed a smothered oath to escape her. That beggar La Faloise again! There was a fellow who wouldn't let her alone! And when she learned the gentleman in question was waiting for her at the porter's lodge she shrieked:

"Tell him I'm coming down after this act. I'm going to catch him one on the face."

Fontan had rushed forward, shouting:

"Madame Bron, just listen. Please listen, Madame Bron. I want you to send up six bottles of champagne between the acts."

But the callboy had again made his appearance. He was out of breath, and in a singsong voice he called out:

"All to go on the stage! It's your turn, Monsieur Fontan. Make haste, make haste!"

"Yes, yes, I'm going, Father Barillot," replied Fontan in a flurry.

And he ran after Mme Bron and continued:

"You understand, eh? Six bottles of champagne in the greenroom between the acts. It's my patron saint's day, and I'm standing the racket."

Simonne and Clarisse had gone off with a great rustling of skirts. Everybody was swallowed up in the distance, and when the passage door had banged with its usual hollow sound a fresh hail shower was heard beating against the windows in the now-silent greenroom. Barillot, a small, pale-faced ancient, who for thirty years had been a servant in the theater, had advanced familiarly toward Mignon and had presented his open snuffbox to him. This proffer of a pinch and its acceptance allowed him a minute's rest in his interminable career up and down stairs and along the dressing-room passage. He certainly had still to look up Mme Nana, as he called her, but she was one of those who followed her own sweet will and didn't care a pin for penalties. Why, if she chose to be too late she was too late! But he stopped short and murmured in great surprise:

"Well, I never! She's ready; here she is! She must know that the prince is here."

Indeed, Nana appeared in the corridor. She was dressed as a fish hag: her arms and face were plastered with white paint, and she had a couple of red dabs under her eyes. Without entering the greenroom she contented herself by nodding to Mignon and Fauchery.

"How do? You're all right?"

Only Mignon shook her outstretched hand, and she hied royally on her way, followed by her dresser, who almost trod on her heels while stooping to adjust the folds of her skirt. In the rear of the dresser came Satin, closing the procession and trying to look quite the lady, though she was already bored to death.

"And Steiner?" asked Mignon sharply.

"Monsieur Steiner has gone away to the Loiret," said Barillot, preparing to return to the neighborhood of the stage. "I expect he's gone to buy a country place in those parts."

"Ah yes, I know, Nana's country place."

Mignon had grown suddenly serious. Oh, that Steiner! He had promised Rose a fine house in the old days! Well, well, it wouldn't do to grow angry with anybody. Here was a position that would have to be won again. From fireplace to console table Mignon paced, sunk in thought yet still unconquered by circumstances. There was no one in the greenroom now save Fauchery and himself. The journalist was tired and had flung himself back into the recesses of the big armchair. There he stayed with half-closed eyes and as quiet as quiet could be, while the other glanced down at him as he passed. When they were alone Mignon scorned to slap him at every turn. What good would it have done, since nobody would have enjoyed the spectacle? He was far too disinterested to be personally entertained by the farcical scenes in which he figured as a bantering husband. Glad of this short-lived respite, Fauchery stretched his feet out languidly toward the fire and let his upturned eyes wander from the barometer to the clock. In the course of his march Mignon planted himself in front of Potier's bust, looked at it without seeming to see it and then turned back to the window, outside which yawned the darkling gulf of the courtyard. The rain had ceased, and there was now a deep silence in the room, which the fierce heat of the coke fire and the flare of the gas jets rendered still more oppressive. Not a sound came from the wings: the staircase and the passages were deadly still.

That choking sensation of quiet, which behind the scenes immediately precedes the end of an act, had begun to pervade the empty greenroom. Indeed, the place seemed to be drowsing off through very breathlessness amid that faint murmur which the stage gives forth when the whole troupe are raising the deafening uproar of some grand finale.

"Oh, the cows!" Bordenave suddenly shouted in his hoarse voice.

He had only just come up, and he was already howling complaints about two chorus girls who had nearly fallen flat on the stage because they were playing the fool together. When his eye lit on Mignon and Fauchery he called them; he wanted to show them something. The prince had just notified a desire to compliment Nana in her dressing room during the next interval. But as he was leading them into the wings the stage manager passed.

"Just you find those hags Fernande and Maria!" cried Bordenave savagely.

Then calming down and endeavoring to assume the dignified expression worn by "heavy fathers," he wiped his face with his pocket handkerchief and added:

"I am now going to receive His Highness."

The curtain fell amid a long-drawn salvo of applause. Then across the twilight stage, which was no longer lit up by the footlights, there followed a disorderly retreat. Actors and supers and chorus made haste to get back to their dressing rooms while the sceneshifters rapidly changed the scenery. Simonne and Clarisse, however, had remained "at the top," talking together in whispers. On the stage, in an interval between their lines, they had just settled a little matter. Clarisse, after viewing the thing in every light, found she preferred not to see La Faloise, who could never decide to leave her for Gaga, and so Simonne was simply to go and explain that a woman ought not to be palled up to in that fashion! At last she agreed to undertake the mission.

Then Simonne, in her theatrical laundress's attire but with furs over her shoulders, ran down the greasy steps of the narrow, winding stairs which led between damp walls to the porter's lodge. This lodge, situated between the actors' staircase and that of the management, was shut in to right and left by large glass partitions and resembled a huge transparent lantern in which two gas jets were flaring.

There was a set of pigeonholes in the place in which were piled letters and newspapers, while on the table various bouquets lay awaiting their recipients in close proximity to neglected heaps of dirty plates and to an old pair of stays, the eyelets of which the portress was busy mending. And in the middle of this untidy, ill-kept storeroom sat four fashionable, white-gloved society men. They occupied as many ancient straw-bottomed chairs and, with an expression at once patient and submissive, kept sharply turning their heads in Mme Bron's direction every time she came down from the theater overhead, for on such occasions she was the bearer of replies. Indeed, she had but now

handed a note to a young man who had hurried out to open it beneath the gaslight in the vestibule, where he had grown slightly pale on reading the classic phrase – how often had others read it in that very place! – "Impossible tonight, my dearie! I'm booked!" La Faloise sat on one of these chairs at the back of the room, between the table and the stove. He seemed bent on passing the evening there, and yet he was not quite happy. Indeed, he kept tucking up his long legs in his endeavors to escape from a whole litter of black kittens who were gamboling wildly round them while the mother cat sat bolt upright, staring at him with yellow eyes.

"Ah, it's you, Mademoiselle Simonne! What can I do for you?" asked the portress.

Simonne begged her to send La Faloise out to her. But Mme Bron was unable to comply with her wishes all at once. Under the stairs in a sort of deep cupboard she kept a little bar, whither the supers were wont to descend for drinks between the acts, and seeing that just at that moment there were five or six tall lubbers there who, still dressed as Boule Noire masqueraders, were dying of thirst and in a great hurry, she lost her head a bit. A gas jet was flaring in the cupboard, within which it was possible to descry a tin-covered table and some shelves garnished with half-emptied bottles. Whenever the door of this coalhole was opened a violent whiff of alcohol mingled with the scent of stale cooking in the lodge, as well as with the penetrating scent of the flowers upon the table.

"Well now," continued the portress when she had served the supers, "is it the little dark chap out there you want?"

"No, no; don't be silly!" said Simonne. "It's the lanky one by the side of the stove. Your cat's sniffing at his trouser legs!"

And with that she carried La Faloise off into the lobby, while the other gentlemen once more resigned themselves to their fate and to semisuffocation and the masqueraders drank on the stairs and indulged in rough horseplay and guttural drunken jests.

On the stage above Bordenave was wild with the sceneshifters, who seemed never to have done changing scenes. They appeared to be acting of set purpose – the prince would certainly have some set piece or other tumbling on his head.

"Up with it! Up with it!" shouted the foreman.

At length the canvas at the back of the stage was raised into position, and the stage was clear. Mignon, who had kept his eye on Fauchery, seized this opportunity in order to start his pummeling matches again. He hugged him in his long arms and cried:

"Oh, take care! That mast just missed crushing you!"

And he carried him off and shook him before setting him down again. In view of the sceneshifters' exaggerated mirth, Fauchery grew white. His lips trembled, and he was ready to flare up in anger while Mignon, shamming good nature, was clapping him on the shoulder with such affectionate violence as nearly to pulverize him.

"I value your health, I do!" he kept repeating. "Egad! I should be in a pretty pickle if anything serious happened to you!"

But just then a whisper ran through their midst: "The prince! The prince!" And everybody turned and looked at the little door which opened out of the main body of the house. At first nothing was visible save Bordenave's round back and beefy neck, which bobbed down and arched up in a series of obsequious obeisances. Then the prince made his appearance. Largely and strongly built, light of beard and rosy of hue, he was not lacking in the kind of distinction peculiar to a sturdy man of pleasure, the square contours of whose limbs are clearly defined by the irreproachable cut of a frock coat. Behind him walked Count Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard, but this particular corner of the theater being dark, the group were lost to view amid huge moving shadows.

In order fittingly to address the son of a queen, who would someday occupy a throne, Bordenave had assumed the tone of a man exhibiting a bear in the street. In a voice tremulous with false emotion he kept repeating:

"If His Highness will have the goodness to follow me – would His Highness deign to come this way? His Highness will take care!"

The prince did not hurry in the least. On the contrary, he was greatly interested and kept pausing in order to look at the sceneshifters' maneuvers. A batten had just been lowered, and the group of gaslights high up among its iron crossbars illuminated the stage with a wide beam of light. Muffat, who had never yet been behind scenes at a theater, was even more astonished than the rest. An uneasy feeling of mingled fear and vague repugnance took possession of him. He looked up into the heights above him, where more battens, the gas jets on which were burning low, gleamed like galaxies of little bluish stars amid a chaos of iron rods, connecting lines of all sizes, hanging stages and canvases spread out in space, like huge cloths hung out to dry.

"Lower away!" shouted the foreman unexpectedly.

And the prince himself had to warn the count, for a canvas was descending. They were setting the scenery for the third act, which was the grotto on Mount Etna. Men were busy planting masts in the sockets, while others went and took frames which were leaning against the walls of the stage and proceeded to lash them with strong cords to the poles already in position. At the back of the stage, with a view to producing the bright rays thrown by Vulcan's glowing forge, a stand had been fixed by a limelight man, who was now lighting various burners under red glasses. The scene was one of confusion, verging to all appearances on absolute chaos, but every little move had been prearranged. Nay, amid all the scurry the whistle blower even took a few turns, stepping short as he did so, in order to rest his legs.

"His Highness overwhelms me," said Bordenave, still bowing low. "The theater is not large, but we do what we can. Now if His Highness deigns to follow me – "

Count Muffat was already making for the dressing-room passage. The really sharp downward slope of the stage had surprised him disagreeably, and he owed no small part of his present anxiety to a feeling that its boards were moving under his feet. Through the open sockets gas was descried burning in the "dock." Human voices and blasts of air, as from a vault, came up thence, and, looking down into the depths of gloom, one became aware of a whole subterranean existence. But just as the count was going up the stage a small incident occurred to stop him. Two little women, dressed for the third act, were chatting by the peephole in the curtain. One of them, straining forward and widening the hole with her fingers in order the better to observe things, was scanning the house beyond.

"I see him," said she sharply. "Oh, what a mug!"

Horrified, Bordenave had much ado not to give her a kick. But the prince smiled and looked pleased and excited by the remark. He gazed warmly at the little woman who did not care a button for His Highness, and she, on her part, laughed unblushingly. Bordenave, however, persuaded the prince to follow him. Muffat was beginning to perspire; he had taken his hat off. What inconvenienced him most was the stuffy, dense, overheated air of the place with its strong, haunting smell, a smell peculiar to this part of a theater, and, as such, compact of the reek of gas, of the glue used in the manufacture of the scenery, of dirty dark nooks and corners and of questionably clean chorus girls. In the passage the air was still more suffocating, and one seemed to breathe a poisoned atmosphere, which was occasionally relieved by the acid scents of toilet waters and the perfumes of various soaps emanating from the dressing rooms. The count lifted his eyes as he passed and glanced up the staircase, for he was well-nigh startled by the keen flood of light and warmth which flowed down upon his back and shoulders. High up above him there was a clicking of ewers and basins, a sound of laughter and of people calling to one another, a banging of doors, which in their continual opening and shutting allowed an odor of womankind to escape – a musky scent of oils and essences mingling with the natural pungency exhaled from human tresses. He did not stop. Nay, he hastened his walk: he almost ran, his skin tingling with the breath of that fiery approach to a world he knew nothing of.

"A theater's a curious sight, eh?" said the Marquis de Chouard with the enchanted expression of a man who once more finds himself amid familiar surroundings.

But Bordenave had at length reached Nana's dressing room at the end of the passage. He quietly turned the door handle; then, cringing again:

"If His Highness will have the goodness to enter – "

They heard the cry of a startled woman and caught sight of Nana as, stripped to the waist, she slipped behind a curtain while her dresser, who had been in the act of drying her, stood, towel in air, before them.

"Oh, it IS silly to come in that way!" cried Nana from her hiding place. "Don't come in; you see you mustn't come in!"

Bordenave did not seem to relish this sudden flight.

"Do stay where you were, my dear. Why, it doesn't matter," he said. "It's His Highness. Come, come, don't be childish."

And when she still refused to make her appearance – for she was startled as yet, though she had begun to laugh – he added in peevish, paternal tones:

"Good heavens, these gentlemen know perfectly well what a woman looks like. They won't eat you."

"I'm not so sure of that," said the prince wittily.

With that the whole company began laughing in an exaggerated manner in order to pay him proper court.

"An exquisitely witty speech – an altogether Parisian speech," as Bordenave remarked.

Nana vouchsafed no further reply, but the curtain began moving. Doubtless she was making up her mind. Then Count Muffat, with glowing cheeks, began to take stock of the dressing room. It was a square room with a very low ceiling, and it was entirely hung with a light-colored Havana stuff. A curtain of the same material depended from a copper rod and formed a sort of recess at the end of the room, while two large windows opened on the courtyard of the theater and were faced, at a distance of three yards at most, by a leprous-looking wall against which the panes cast squares of yellow light amid the surrounding darkness. A large dressing glass faced a white marble toilet table, which was garnished with a disorderly array of flasks and glass boxes containing oils, essences and powders. The count went up to the dressing glass and discovered that he was looking very flushed and had small drops of perspiration on his forehead. He dropped his eyes and came and took up a position in front of the toilet table, where the basin, full of soapy water, the small, scattered, ivory toilet utensils and the damp sponges, appeared for some moments to absorb his attention. The feeling of dizziness which he had experienced when he first visited Nana in the Boulevard Haussmann once more overcame him. He felt the thick carpet soften under foot, and the gasjets burning by the dressing table and by the glass seemed to shoot whistling flames about his temples. For one moment, being afraid of fainting away under the influence of those feminine odors which he now re-encountered, intensified by the heat under the low-pitched ceiling, he sat down on the edge of a softly padded divan between the two windows. But he got up again almost directly and, returning to the dressing table, seemed to gaze with vacant eyes into space, for he was thinking of a bouquet of tuberoses which had once faded in his bedroom and had nearly killed him in their death. When tuberoses are turning brown they have a human smell.

"Make haste!" Bordenave whispered, putting his head in behind the curtain.

The prince, however, was listening complaisantly to the Marquis de Chouard, who had taken up a hare's-foot on the dressing table and had begun explaining the way grease paint is put on. In a corner of the room Satin, with her pure, virginal face, was scanning the gentlemen keenly, while the dresser, Mme Jules by name, was getting ready Venus' tights and tunic. Mme Jules was a woman of no age. She had the parchment skin and changeless features peculiar to old maids whom no one ever knew in their younger years. She had indeed shriveled up in the burning atmosphere of the dressing rooms and amid the most famous thighs and bosoms in all Paris. She wore everlastingly a faded black

dress, and on her flat and sexless chest a perfect forest of pins clustered above the spot where her heart should have been.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said Nana, drawing aside the curtain, "but you took me by surprise."

They all turned round. She had not clothed herself at all, had, in fact, only buttoned on a little pair of linen stays which half revealed her bosom. When the gentlemen had put her to flight she had scarcely begun undressing and was rapidly taking off her fishwife's costume. Through the opening in her drawers behind a corner of her shift was even now visible. There she stood, bare-armed, bare-shouldered, bare-breasted, in all the adorable glory of her youth and plump, fair beauty, but she still held the curtain with one hand, as though ready to draw it to again upon the slightest provocation.

"Yes, you took me by surprise! I never shall dare – " she stammered in pretty, mock confusion, while rosy blushes crossed her neck and shoulders and smiles of embarrassment played about her lips.

"Oh, don't apologize," cried Bordenave, "since these gentlemen approve of your good looks!"

But she still tried the hesitating, innocent, girlish game, and, shivering as though someone were tickling her, she continued:

"His Highness does me too great an honor. I beg His Highness will excuse my receiving him thus – "

"It is I who am importunate," said the prince, "but, madame, I could not resist the desire of complimenting you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.