

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

ÉMILE ZOLA

NANA

A new translation by Douglas Parmée



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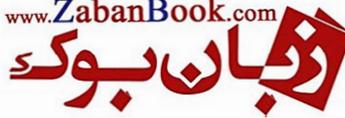


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*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*

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## INTRODUCTION

NANA was the ninth in Zola's vast cyclical fresco of twenty novels, first planned in the sixties of the nineteenth century under the title of 'natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire'. Balzac's similarly vast project, the *Comédie humaine*, was always in his mind, and he was determined that his cycle dealing with several generations of the Rougon-Macquart family should be different. He had been impressed by the ideas of the positivist philosopher Taine, who stressed the importance of three so-called natural laws in determining personality: heredity, environment, and what he calls *le moment*, the dynamic momentum of a particular period. Zola's cycle was to be openly and consciously scientific, which he understood to mean giving the physical a predominant role in human affairs. For this method he coined the term 'naturalism'. He was even led to hope that he might turn the novel into a scientific experiment to prove certain hypotheses, though it would be indeed a strange science where the data, the development, and the conclusion depended on one man's imagination and choice. In *Nana*, though material and social pressures are given considerable emphasis, psychology is nowhere completely sacrificed to physiology; the main characters are far from single-dimensional, and minor ones, especially the women, are often markedly individual. The male protagonist, Count Muffat, is an excellent example: originally swept off his feet by Nana's physical beauty, his purely physical passion is gradually sublimated into tender devotion. What is more, by an ingenious twist, apart from being highly sexed, he is unsatisfied in his marriage and deeply, even mystically pious, almost a Baudelairean character for whom one of the pleasures of love seems to be the thrill of sinning and even the masochistic anticipation of chastisement. And this tormented man is not just anybody; he is the chamberlain to the Empress Eugénie, and as such can be made the scapegoat for Imperial society.

As part of his methodical approach to novel-writing Zola always prepared a preliminary sketch of his general intentions, of his characters, major and minor, and later even detailed chapter-schedules, though modifications would come while writing. The notes on *Nana* are very enlightening and very explicit: 'the philosophical subject is this: a whole society rushing to get sex. A pack after a bitch who's not on heat and despises the dogs following her... Nana dominates and crushes everything... the various episodes have only a secondary value.' To achieve this dominance of a sex-obsessed society she needs a beautiful body, and the reader is constantly present, almost as a voyeur, at her display, naked or nearly naked, on stage and off. She is, however, more than a body; the wily theatre-manager Bordenave who launches her in the first chapter, surely one of the most brilliant and intriguing chapters in any nineteenth-century novel, puts the reason for her success in a nutshell: she's got a voice like a cornrake, she can't act, but besides her obvious physical charms, she has 'something else', an indefinable, magical aura, and it is this that captures the public. It is a charm far from purely physical: in her last triumphal appearance on the Paris stage, in Chapter 13, although she is wearing only white tights and a gold belt, she is almost disembodied; she no longer tries to sing or act, not even to move: she stands in a grotto of sparkling mirrors gleaming with electric light, amidst cascades of diamonds and streams of glittering pearls, and strikes an 'artistic' pose. She has become a fairy princess. Someone who sees her describes her as 'like an image of the Good Lord'. Her vulgar, titillating display of sexual bravado is gone; she is, as Zola said in his notes, 'flesh, but flesh with all its grace... sex on an altar with everybody offering sacrifices to it.'

One thing is quite plain: she is no ordinary brothel inmate, though shown as no stranger to *maisons de rendezvous*, nor a street-walker, even if occasionally reduced to the streets when pressed for cash. There would in any case have been little point in writing a novel on such a well-worn theme. Zola had himself in his semi-autobiographical first novel, *La Confession de Claude*, dealt with this subject in 1865, where the torments of the idealistic Claude to reform a prostitute have similarities

with Muffat's predicament in *Nana*. More recently, similar ground had been covered by two fellow-writers, Huysmans in his *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* of 1876, and Edmond de Goncourt in *La Fille Elisa* in the following year; the theme had obvious appeal to a society in which male sexuality was so deeply brothel-based. *Nana* is on quite a different scale: although an individual with strong personal characteristics, she is the epitome of a whole class of *courtisanes*, kept women, often associated with the stage, luxury articles which were so prominent a feature of smart society, the world of *galanterie*, of amorous intrigue, the *demi-monde*, where respectable women were never seen but only their wealthy husbands and bachelor men-about-town, a society which flourished during the Second Empire behind the official façade of hypocritical decency maintained by the censor and backed up by the law courts, an age which saw the prosecution of *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Madame Bovary*.

Zola detested the Second Empire, which he saw as an unholy alliance of an authoritarian police state and a triumphantly dogmatic, all-powerful Roman Catholic hierarchy, both of which he was able to encapsulate in Muffat. It was a society singularly propitious for the rise of the courtesans he had in mind, a world of festivity which was to reach its zenith in the World Fair of 1867, the year in which his novel starts, when royalty and notables flocked to Paris from all over Europe and beyond; ironically, the name of Bismarck turns up in many conversations—an irony underlined in the last chapter. But the surrender at Sedan was still three years away, and the Second Empire could still be seen as a brilliant regime that, having toppled a divided and discredited Second Republic in 1852, had launched into a career of galloping free enterprise and intensive industrialization, with its concomitant of rabid speculation and a booming—occasionally, of course, busting—Stock Exchange, a phenomenon which Zola was to examine more closely in his novel *L'Argent* in 1891. Paris itself was being revamped into its modern guise by the transforming genius of Baron Haussmann, whose splendid straight boulevards were not only grand but offered a clear line of fire in the case of any attempt by mob violence to overthrow an unpopular government. At the top of one of the

young piece had been causing quite an upset. Scenting a rival, his star turn Rose Mignon, herself a very gifted actress with a charming singing voice, had been threatening every day to leave him in the lurch. And what a fuss over the poster, heavens above! In the end it'd been decided to print the actresses' names in the same size letters. He didn't like being bugged about. When one of his 'little women', as he called them, didn't toe the line, he'd give her a kick up the arse. Otherwise life would be unbearable. After all, he knew what the sluts were worth, he sold them!

'Well, well', he said, suddenly breaking off. 'Mignon and Steiner . . . The heavenly twins . . . You know, Steiner's beginning to get fed up with Rose, so her husband won't let him out of his sight, in case he tries to do a bunk.'

The whole pavement in front of the theatre was flooded with light by a row of blazing gas-jets along the cornice; two small trees stood out in a lurid green, and on the brightly lit advertising-pillar in the distance the posters could be read as easily as in broad daylight; further on, where the shadows were already deeper, the confused, constantly moving mass of people on the boulevard was dotted with tiny specks of light. Many of the men didn't go in immediately but waited outside to finish their cigars; in the glare of the gas-jets their faces were ghastly pale, and on the asphalt their shadows were short and very dark. Mignon, an extremely tall, burly fellow, with the square head of a fairground strong man, was elbowing his way through the knots of people, dragging the banker Steiner along with him by the arm—a tiny little man, already pot-bellied, with a round face fringed by a greying beard.

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

'Oh, so that was her!' exclaimed Steiner. 'I thought it might have been, but as I was going out as she was coming in, I only caught a glimpse of her.'

Mignon was staring at the floor, nervously twisting a large diamond ring round his finger. He'd realized that they were referring to Nana. Then, as Bordenave started giving a description of his latest discovery which brought a glint into the banker's eye, he finally spoke out:

'Oh, come on, my dear chap, she's a slut! The public will

send her packing on the spot . . . Steiner, old man, you know my wife's waiting for you in her dressing-room.'

He tried to get him away. Steiner was reluctant to leave Bordenave. Behind them a queue of people were storming the box-office and the hubbub of voices was growing louder and louder, with the name 'Nana' providing a lively and melodious refrain. The men stationed in front of the billboard were spelling it out in full, while others mentioned it in passing, with a questioning note; the women, smiling uneasily, were whispering it quietly, with a look of surprise. Nobody knew Nana. Where on earth had she sprung from? People were telling each other stories. Jokes were being exchanged in whispers. The name sounded endearing, it had a nice familiar ring, everybody liked pronouncing it; merely saying it made the crowd cheerful and sympathetically inclined. Paris society was being gripped by a typically feverish curiosity, a sudden, stupid craze. People couldn't wait to see Nana. One lady had the flounce of her dress ripped off, a gentleman lost his hat.

'Oh, you're wanting to know far too much!' cried Bordenave, besieged by a score of men asking for information. 'You'll be seeing her . . . I've got to go, they need me somewhere else!'

He slipped away, delighted at having fired his public's interest; Mignon shrugged his shoulders and reminded Steiner that Rose was waiting to show him her first-act costume.

'Look, there's Lucy getting out of her carriage', said la Faloise to Fauchery.

It was indeed Lucy Stewart, a plain little woman, about 40 years old, with too long a neck, a thin, drawn face, and thick lips, but very charming, vivacious, and graceful. She had brought Caroline Héquet and her mother along with her; Caroline was beautiful; her mother looked like a highly respectable stuffed owl.

'Come and sit with us, I've booked an extra seat', she said to Fauchery.

'Oh no, thanks very much', he replied. 'I suppose you want me not to see what's happening! I've got a seat in the stalls, I prefer that.'

Lucy was annoyed. Was he afraid to show himself with her in public? Then she suddenly quietened down and changed her tack.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you knew Nana?’

‘Nana? I’ve never even seen her!’

‘Are you telling the truth? Someone swore you’d been to bed with her.’

But Mignon came up with his finger to his lips, warning them to keep quiet, and in reply to Lucy’s query, pointed to a young man going by and whispered:

‘Nana’s fancy man.’

They all looked at him: a nice chap. Fauchery recognized him as Daguinet, who’d got through three hundred thousand francs on women and was now dabbling in the Stock Exchange so as to be able to offer them flowers and the odd meal. Lucy thought he had wonderful eyes.

‘Ah, there’s Blanche!’ she cried. ‘She’s the one who told me you’d been to bed with Nana.’

Blanche de Sivry, a strapping blonde, with pretty features, showing signs of becoming rather blowzy, was coming in with a slightly built man, very elegant and distinguished-looking.

‘Count Xavier de Vandevres’, whispered Fauchery into la Faloise’s ear.

The count shook the journalist’s hand while Blanche and Lucy launched into a lively altercation, blocking the way with their heavily flounced dresses, one blue, the other pink. The name ‘Nana’ was coming up in such shrill tones that people started listening. Count de Vandevres took Blanche away; but now curiosity had become even keener, and Nana’s name was being taken up more and more loudly all round the foyer. Weren’t they ever going to begin? Men were pulling out their watches, late-comers were leaping out of their carriages even before they stopped, groups of people were coming in from outside where passers-by were craning their necks to look in as they dawdled along the now-deserted stretch of pavement under the glare of the gas-jets. A down-at-heel young tough came up whistling, stopped at the entrance in front of a poster, called out: ‘Olé Nana!’ in a husky, drunken voice, and went swaying off along the boulevard. People laughed and some very distinguished-looking gentlemen repeated: ‘Olé

Nana!’ There was a lot of jostling, a row broke out at the ticket-office, the buzz of voices was becoming an uproar as, in a heady wave of crude sensuality and stupidity typical of crowds, everybody began clamouring for Nana to appear.

Above the babel of voices the bell started ringing and the cry: ‘It’s the bell! It’s the bell!’ even spread to the boulevard outside. There was a general stampede, with everyone anxious to get in; more attendants were fetched to check the tickets. The worried Mignon at last managed to get hold of Steiner, who hadn’t gone to look at Rose’s costume. At the first sound of the bell, la Faloise had dashed off through the crowd, dragging Fauchery with him, determined not to miss the overture. Such eagerness on the part of the public annoyed Lucy Stewart: how rude people were, pushing ladies about! She waited till last, with Caroline Héquet and her mother. The foyer was empty; in the background, the rumble on the boulevard continued.

‘As if their shows were always funny’, Lucy kept saying as they went upstairs.

Inside the auditorium, Fauchery and la Faloise stood in front of their seats, once again looking round.

The theatre was ablaze with light. The gas-jets were now full on, and the huge, glittering, crystal chandelier was flooding the audience in a dazzling pink and yellow light from the proscenium arch down to the pit. The deep red of the seats had a silken shimmer, while the bright gleam of gilt was toned down by the soft green of the decoration running along under the garish ceiling paintings. The footlights were turned up and suddenly the heavy, dark red curtain glowed with the opulence of some fabulous palace, somewhat grander than the peeling gilt stucco surrounds, where patches of bare plaster could be seen. It was already hot. The musicians were tuning up at their desks; the light trills of the flutes, the muffled sighs of the horns, and the tuneful voice of the violins rose above the increasing buzz of conversation. The audience were all chatting, pushing, and settling down after the scramble for their seats; in the corridors, a jostling mass of people was jamming the doorways; the stream seemed endless. People were waving to each other, dresses were being crumpled, the parading skirts and hairstyles were interspersed with black

frock-coats or tails. But the rows of seats were gradually filling up; the eye was caught by a pale dress, a face with a delicate profile bending forward, a flash of jewellery entwined in a chignon. In one box, a patch of bare shoulder gleamed white as silk. Other women were languidly fanning themselves, casting glances over the hustle and bustle; smart young men in low-cut waistcoats and with a gardenia in their buttonholes had stationed themselves beside the orchestra, peering through opera-glasses poised in their gloved fingertips. The two cousins were looking for familiar faces. Mignon and Steiner were together, side by side in a ground-floor box, resting their wrists on the velvet-covered rails. Blanche de Sivry seemed to have a stage box all to herself. But la Faloise was particularly interested in Daguinet, who was in an orchestra stall two rows in front of his own. Next to him sat a very young man, 17 at the most, a schoolboy playing truant; he had the look of a little cherub, with superb eyes which were popping out of his head.

‘Who’s that lady in the dress circle?’ asked la Faloise suddenly. ‘The one with the girl in blue beside her.’

He pointed to a large, tightly corseted woman, whose hair, once fair but now white, fell in a profusion of yellow-rinsed girlish curls over her round, puffy face plastered with rouge.

‘That’s Gaga’, Fauchery replied simply and as his cousin appeared perplexed by the name, he added:

‘Don’t you know Gaga? . . . She was the darling of the early thirties.\* Now she lugs her daughter around with her all the time.’

La Faloise didn’t look at the girl; he was thrilled by the sight of Gaga and couldn’t take his eyes off her; he thought she still looked wonderful, but was afraid to say so.

Meanwhile the leader of the orchestra was raising his bow and the musicians launched into the overture. People were still coming in, and the din and general commotion were increasing. In this first-night audience, always full of the same people, there were little private groups smilingly acknowledging each other, while the regular theatre-goers, still with their hats on, were exchanging waves and nods, relaxed and very much at home. This was Paris: the Paris of literature, finance, and pleasure; lots of journalists, a few authors, stockbrokers,

and more tarts than respectable women; a strangely mixed bunch, comprising every kind of genius, tainted with every kind of vice, with the same look of feverish excitement and weariness painted on every face. In response to his cousin's questions, Fauchery pointed out the boxes occupied by newspapermen and members of clubs, then told him the names of the dramatic critics, one lean and shrivelled, with thin, malicious lips, and one especially, fat and good-natured in appearance, who was lolling against his neighbour's shoulder, an ingénue whom he was ogling with a loving, fatherly eye.

But seeing la Faloise bow to some people sitting in a box facing the stage, Fauchery stopped in surprise:

'Good Lord, do you know Count Muffat de Beuville?' he asked.

'Oh, I've known them for ages', la Faloise replied. 'The Muffats own a property close to ours. I often go and see them . . . The count's with his wife and father-in-law, the Marquis de Chouard.'

Flattered by his cousin's surprise, he smugly enlarged on the details: the marquis was a member of the Conseil d'État\* and the count had just been made the Empress's chamberlain. Fauchery had picked up his opera-glasses and was looking at the countess, who was plump, with a fair skin, brown hair, and fine dark eyes.

'You must introduce me in the interval', he said finally. 'I've already met the count but I'd like to be invited to their Tuesday parties.'

The upper galleries yelled: 'Quiet down there!' The overture had begun, though people were still coming in. These late-comers were forcing whole rows of spectators to stand up, box-doors were being slammed, there were loud disputes in the corridors. The continued chatter was like the busy chirping of noisy sparrows at dusk. It was chaotic, a confused jumble of heads and waving arms, with some people sitting down and making themselves comfortable, others still stubbornly on their feet, determined to have one final look round. From the obscure depths of the pit there came a violent call to: 'Sit down! Sit down!' A thrill had run through the house: at last they were about to make the acquaintance of that famous Nana, whom the whole of Paris had been talking about for the last week!

Gradually, apart from the odd raucous outburst, the talking gently died down, and in the middle of this muffled murmur, as the noise subsided to a whisper, the orchestra burst into a lively sort of jig, a waltz with a rhythm as vulgar as a dirty laugh. The audience, titillated, started to smile, while the claque in the pit-stalls broke into wild applause. The curtain was going up.

La Faloise was still chatting away: 'I say, Lucy's got a man with her.'

He was looking at the dress-circle box on the right where Caroline and Lucy were sitting in front. At the back could be seen the dignified face of Caroline's mother and the profile of a tall, immaculately dressed young man with a superb mop of blond hair.

'Look', la Faloise insisted again. 'There's a gentleman there.'

Somewhat reluctantly Fauchery pointed his opera-glasses in the direction of the box and immediately turned away.

'Oh, it's Labordette', he said offhandedly, as if everyone would consider it natural and of no importance for that man to be there.

Behind them someone called out: 'Be quiet!' They stopped talking. From the stalls up to the top gallery the packed house now sat motionless and upright, intent on the stage. The first act of *The Blonde Venus* took place in Olympus, a pasteboard Olympus with clouds as side-wings and Jupiter's throne on the right. First of all, Iris and Ganymede, attended by a choir of celestial servants, had to sing a chorus whilst arranging the seats for a meeting of the gods. Once more, paid clappers broke into their planned round of applause; the general public, still somewhat at sea, suspended their judgement. However, la Faloise had clapped Clarisse Besnus, one of Bordenave's 'little women', who was taking the part of Iris, dressed in a delicate blue costume with a broad, rainbow-coloured scarf tied round her waist.

'You know, in order to get into that dress, she's had to leave off her slip', he said in a stage whisper. 'We tried it on this morning. . . . You could see her slip under her arms and down her back.'

There was a fresh stir in the audience: Rose Mignon had just come on stage. She was Diana, and being dark and thin

had neither the face nor the figure for the part, but her adorably impish ugliness, so essentially Parisian, was charming, a sort of parody of the character. The words of her first song, in which she complained that Mars was on the point of deserting her for Venus, were unbelievably silly, but she sang them with such coyness and so many saucy innuendoes that the public warmed to her. Her husband and Steiner, sitting cheek by jowl, were tactfully laughing. And the whole house exploded when the highly popular actor Prullière came on stage: he was Mars, a Mars straight out of pantomime, dressed up as a general with a giant plume on his helmet and wielding a sword which reached shoulder-high. He'd had his bellyful of Diana; she fancied herself too much. At this, Diana swore she'd keep a sharp eye on him and take her revenge. Their duet ended with a comic yodelling song which Prullière brought off hilariously, in a voice like a squawling tom-cat, with the asinine self-satisfaction of a juvenile lead conducting a torrid love affair, rolling swashbuckling eyes in a way which brought high-pitched laughter from the boxes.

After this the audience became lukewarm again: they found the next scenes boring. Old Bosc, a moronic Jupiter with his head squeezed into an immense crown, barely managed to raise a smile in his domestic squabble with Juno over the cook's bill. The parade of gods and goddesses, Neptune, Pluto, Minerva, and all the rest, almost wrecked the show; the public was getting impatient; a sinister muttering was slowly spreading through the house as people started to lose interest and let their eyes wander round the theatre. Lucy was laughing with Labordette; Count de Vandevres was craning his neck behind Blanche's plump shoulders; meanwhile Fauchery was examining the Muffats out of the corner of his eye: the count was looking solemn as if he didn't know what was happening, the countess had a vague smile on her face and was gazing dreamily into space. But suddenly, at this awkward moment, the claque began loudly clapping, in time, like the rattle of gunfire. People looked towards the stage: was it Nana at last? She was certainly taking her time!

But it was a deputation of mortals introduced by Ganymede and Iris, respectable middle-class citizens, all deceived

for nothing for weeks and weeks. I saw him yesterday and he cut me dead! How's that for a pig? I'm a bloody sight better than him!

She'd started pacing up and down again. She banged her fist down on a little table.

'Bloody hell! It's unfair! Society's all wrong! They set on women when it's the men who demand that sort of thing . . . Look, I can tell you one thing now: Whenever I went with them, you know, well, I never enjoyed it, I got absolutely no pleasure out of it at all, it was just a chore, I tell you honestly . . . Well, I ask you, am I in any way to blame for all that? . . . Yes, they bored me stiff! But for them, my dear man, but for what they made me do, I'd be a nun praying to God, because I've always been religious . . . And if they lose their money or their lives, it's their own fault, they can go to hell . . . It's nothing to do with me!'

'Of course not', said Labordette solemnly.

Mignon was shown in by Zoé; Nana greeted him with a smile; she'd had a good cry, it was all over now. He was still overwhelmed with enthusiasm for her set-up and congratulated her on it; but she gave the impression of being tired of her splendid life-style, she was beginning to dream of other things, maybe one of these days she'd sell up the lot. Then, when he gave as pretext for his call a benefit performance in aid of old Bosc, who was paralysed and confined to an armchair, she was very sympathetic and agreed to book two boxes. At this point, Zoé came back to say that her carriage was waiting; she asked for her hat and, while she was tying her ribbons, told them about poor Satin's escapade and added:

'I'm off to the hospital to see her. Nobody loved me like she did. Oh, people are right to accuse men of being hard-hearted! . . . I may never see her again, who knows . . . Never mind, I'll try and see her, I want to give her a last kiss and a hug.'

Labordette and Mignon smiled. She wasn't sad any more; she smiled too, because those two didn't matter, they'd understand. And the two men stood watching her, in solemn, speechless admiration, while she buttoned up her gloves: there she stood, by herself, amidst all her treasures, with a

whole horde of men grovelling at her feet. Like those dreaded monsters of old whose lairs were littered with bones, she was walking on skulls and surrounded by cataclysms: Vandevres' mad holocaust, the melancholy Foucarmont languishing in oblivion in the China seas, the downfall of Steiner, condemned to having to make an honest living, la Faloise's idiotic conceit, and Georges's bloodless corpse now being watched over by his brother Philippe, just released from jail. She'd completed her work of death and destruction; the fly which had taken off from the cesspit of the slums with its germs capable of putrefying society had poisoned those men merely by settling on them. It was fair, justice had been done, she'd avenged her world, the world of beggars and the under-privileged; and while the fiery red of her pubic hair glowed triumphantly over its victims stretched out at her feet, like a rising sun shining in triumph over a bloody battlefield, she herself remained, a superb, mindless animal, oblivious of what she'd done, never anything but a 'good sort of girl', a big, fat wench bursting with health and the joy of life. All this now meant nothing to her, her mansion seemed too small, full of furniture that was standing in her way, something quite trivial, just a starting-point for further ventures. She had dreams of bigger and better things. And so she went off, dressed as if for a ball, to give Satin a last kiss, looking neat, durable, in mint condition, untouched by human hand.

All three of them leaned out, greatly intrigued. The trees partly blocked their view and at times the torches were hidden behind the foliage. They tried to get a glimpse of Nana's men waiting below, but the porch was obscured by a projecting balcony and they could only pick out Count Muffat, a black bundle sitting slumped on the bench and holding his handkerchief in front of his face. A carriage had driven up and Lucy recognized Maria Blond; one more woman come to see what was happening. She wasn't by herself; behind her, a fat man could be seen getting out of the carriage.

'Good Lord, it's that crook Steiner', exclaimed Caroline. 'Haven't they packed him off back to Cologne yet? . . . I'd like to see his face when he comes in!'

They turned back into the room, but when Maria Blond appeared later, having twice taken the wrong stairs, she was by herself and when questioned by a surprised Lucy:

'Him? Oh my dear, if you think he'd ever come up . . . It's astonishing that he's even brought me as far as the door . . . There are about a dozen of them down there, smoking cigars.'

Indeed, it was turning into a general meeting of all Nana's men-friends. Having set out for a stroll along the boulevard in order to take a look at what was happening, they were calling out to each other, exclaiming when they heard of the poor girl's death. Then they began talking politics and strategy. Bordenave, Daguene, Labordette, Prullière, and numbers of others joined the group. They listened to Fontan explaining his plan of campaign to take Berlin in five days flat.

Meanwhile, distressed by the presence of the dead woman, Maria Blond was whispering like the others.

'Poor pet! Last time I saw her was in the grotto at the Gaietés.'

'Ah, she's changed now, she's changed now', Rose Mignon said again, giving her sad, grief-stricken smile.

Two more women arrived: Tatan Néné and Louise Violaine. They'd been combing the Grand Hotel for the last twenty minutes, following the directions of various members of its staff; they'd been up and down thirty storeys or more, caught up in the mad rush of travellers scurrying to get out of Paris, in panic at the thought of war and the commotion on

the boulevards. As a result, when the ladies came in, too exhausted to worry about the dead woman, all they could do was to flop down on their chairs. And in fact at that very moment a tremendous din arose in the room next door; trunks were being shoved around, people were colliding with furniture, and loud voices could be heard speaking in uncouth accents. It was a young Austrian couple. Gaga informed them that while Nana was in her death-throes they'd been playing at chasing each other round the room, and as the two bedrooms were separated only by a locked door, you could hear them laughing and kissing when they'd caught each other.

'Look, we must get out', said Clarisse. 'We're not going to bring her back to life . . . Are you coming, Simonne?'

They all looked sideways at the bed but made no move to go, though giving their skirts little taps in preparation for their departure. Lucy was again leaning with her elbows on the window-sill, away from the others. A lump was slowly forming in her throat, as if the yelling crowd outside was itself making her miserable. Torches were still being carried past, throwing out sparks; in the distance, the groups of people were rippling in the gloom like long flocks of sheep being led by night to the slaughter, and this confused, whirling mass of people streaming by created a feeling of terror and immense pity for the massacres to come. They were bewildered, their voices cracking in the frenzy of their intoxication as they hurtled towards their unknown fate beyond the dark wall of the horizon.

'On to Berlin! On to Berlin! On to Berlin!'

Lucy turned and leaned back against the window, deathly pale.

'Oh, my God! What's going to become of us?'

The ladies shook their heads, looking very serious and worried by the situation.

'Well, as for me', said Caroline Héquet with her usual calm, 'tomorrow I'm off to London . . . Mummy's already there, setting up house for me . . . I'm not going to wait and be slaughtered in Paris, you can bet your life on that!'

In her prudence, her mother had prevailed on her to move her money out of the country: you can never tell how a war's

going to end . . . Maria Blond was angry: she was patriotic and talked of following the army:

‘What a coward you are! . . . If I thought they’d have me, I’d dress up as a man and take pot-shots at those Prussian pigs! . . . And even if we all died, our lives aren’t worth all that much, are they?’

Blanche de Sivry was livid:

‘Don’t you dare say nasty things about the Prussians! . . . They’re men like all the rest, and not forever on the look-out for women, like Frenchmen . . . They’ve just expelled the little Prussian who was with me, a very rich, very gentle little boy who wouldn’t hurt a fly. It’s disgraceful, I shall be ruined . . . And I want to warn you, I don’t want anybody getting on my back or I’ll be off to Germany after him like a shot!’

As they were all squabbling with each other, Gaga muttered sadly:

‘Well, for me it’s the end. I’ve got no luck at all . . . I’ve just finished buying my little cottage in Juvisy, you can’t imagine all the sacrifices I’ve had to make to get it, Lili had to help me out . . . And now war’s been declared and the Prussians are going to come and set fire to everything . . . How can I start again at my age?’

‘That’s nonsense’, said Caroline, ‘I don’t give a damn! I’ll always find some way or other.’

‘Of course’, agreed Simonne. ‘It’s going to be fun . . . Maybe it’ll work out all right, in spite of everything . . .’

She completed her sentence with a smile. Tatan Néné and Louise Violaine were of the same view. The former spoke of the fantastic binges she’d had with soldiers, really good sorts who’d do the craziest things for women. But the ladies were now raising their voices so loudly that Rose, who was still sitting on the coffer, told them to shush. There was a shocked hush and they cast a sidelong glance towards the dead woman, as if the request had issued from behind the shadow of the curtains. In the profound silence which ensued, a deathly silence in which they could sense the corpse stretched out stiff and cold beside them, the yells of the crowd burst out once more:

‘On to Berlin! On to Berlin! On to Berlin!’

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# ÉMILE ZOLA

## NANA

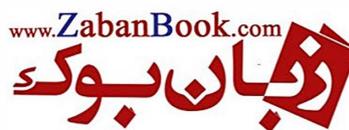
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