

Lo! 'Twas a Gala Night!

ARNOLD BENNETT

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I

PARIS. And not merely Paris, but Paris en fête, Paris decorated, Paris idle, Paris determined to enjoy itself, and succeeding brilliantly. Venetian masts of red and gold lined the gay pavements of the grands boulevards and the Avenue de l'Opéra; and suspended from these in every direction, transverse and lateral, hung garlands of flowers whose petals were of coloured paper, and whose hearts were electric globes that in the evening would burst into flame. The effect of the city's toilette reached the extreme of opulence, for no expense had been spared. Paris was welcoming monarchs, and had spent two million francs in obedience to the maxim that what is worth doing at all is worth doing well.

The Grand Hotel, with its eight hundred rooms full of English and Americans, at the upper end of the Avenue de l'Opéra, looked down at the Grand Hotel du Louvre, with its four hundred rooms full of English and Americans, at the lower end of the Avenue de l'Opéra. These two establishments had the best views in the whole city; and perhaps the finest view of all was that obtainable from a certain second floor window of the Grand Hotel, precisely at the corner of the Boulevard des Capucines and the Rue Auber. From this window one could see the boulevards in both directions, the Opéra, the Place de l'Opéra, the Avenue de l'Opéra, the Rue du Quatre Septembre, and the multitudinous life of the vivid thoroughfares — the glittering cafés, the dazzling shops, the painted kiosks, the lumbering omnibuses, the gliding trams, the hooting automobiles, the swift and careless cabs, the private carriages, the suicidal bicycles, the newsmen, the toysellers, the touts, the beggars, and all the holiday crowd, sombre men and radiant women, chattering, laughing, bustling, staring, drinking, under the innumerable tricolours and garlands of paper flowers.

That particular view was a millionaire's view, and it happened to be the temporary property of Cecil Thorold, who was enjoying it and the afternoon sun at the open window, with three companions. Eve Fincastle looked at it with the analytic eye of the journalist, while Kitty Sartorius, as was quite proper for an actress, deemed it a sort of frame for herself, as she leaned over the balcony like a Juliet on the stage. The third guest in Cecil's sitting-room was Lionel Belmont, the Napoleonic Anglo-American theatrical manager, in whose crown Kitty herself was the chief star. Mr. Belmont, a big, burly, good-humoured, shrewd man of something over forty, said he had come to Paris on business. But for two days the business had been solely to look after Kitty Sartorius and minister to her caprices. At the present moment his share of the view consisted mainly of Kitty; in the same way Cecil's share of the view consisted mainly of Eve Fincastle; but this at least was right and decorous, for the betrothal of the millionaire and the journalist had been definitely announced. Otherwise Eve would have been back at work in Fleet Street a week ago.

"The gala performance is to-night, isn't it?" said Eve, gazing at the vast and superbly ornamented Opera House.

"Yes," said Cecil.

"What a pity we can't be there! I should so have liked to see the young Queen in evening dress. And they say the interior decorations ——"

"Nothing simpler," said Cecil. "If you want to go, dear, let us go."

Kitty Sartorius looked round quickly. "Mr. Belmont has tried to get seats, and can't. Haven't you, Bel? You know the whole audience is invited. The invitations are issued by the Minister of Fine Arts."

"Still, in Paris, anything can be got by paying for it," Cecil insisted.

"My dear young friend," said Lionel Belmont, "I guess if seats were to be had, I should have struck one or two yesterday. I put no limit on the price, and I reckon I ought to know what theatre prices run to. Over at the Metropolitan in New York I've seen a box change hands at two thousand dollars, for one night."

"Nevertheless ——" Cecil began again.

"And the performance starting in six hours from now!" Lionel Belmont exclaimed. "Not much!"

But Cecil persisted.

"Seen the Herald to-day?" Belmont questioned. "No? Well, listen. This will interest you." He drew a paper from his pocket and read: "Seats for the Opéra Gala. The traffic in seats for the gala performance at the Opéra during the last Royal Visit to Paris aroused considerable comment and not a little dissatisfaction. Nothing,

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however, was done, and the traffic in seats for to-night's spectacle, at which the President and their Imperial Majesties will be present, has, it is said, amounted to a scandal. Of course, the offer so suddenly made, five days ago, by Madame Félise and Mademoiselle Malva, the two greatest living dramatic sopranos, to take part in the performance, immediately and enormously intensified interest in the affair, for never yet have these two supreme artists appeared in the same theatre on the same night. No theatre could afford the luxury. Our readers may remember that in our columns and in the columns of the Figaro there appeared four days ago an advertisement to the following effect: 'A box, also two orchestra stalls, for the Opéra Gala, to be disposed of, owing to illness. Apply, 155, Rue de la Paix.' We sent four several reporters to answer that advertisement. The first was offered a stage-box for seven thousand five hundred francs, and two orchestra stalls in the second row for twelve hundred and fifty francs. The second was offered a box opposite the stage on the second tier, and two stalls in the seventh row. The third had the chance of four stalls in the back row and a small box just behind them; the fourth was offered something else. The thing was obviously, therefore, a regular agency. Everybody is asking: 'How were these seats obtained? From the Ministry of Fine Arts, or from the invités?' Echo answers 'How?' The authorities, however, are stated to have interfered at last, and to have put an end to this buying and selling of what should be an honourable distinction."

"Bravo!" said Cecil.

"And that's so!" Belmont remarked, dropping the paper. "I went to 155, Rue de la Paix myself yesterday, and was told that nothing whatever was to be had, not at any price."

"Perhaps you didn't offer enough," said Cecil.

"Moreover, I notice the advertisement does not appear to-day. I guess the authorities have crumpled it up."

"Still ——" Cecil went on monotonously.

"Look here," said Belmont, grim and a little nettled. "Just to cut it short, I'll bet you a two-hundred-dollar dinner at Paillard's that you can't get seats for to-night — not even two, let alone four."

"You really want to bet?"

"Well," drawled Belmont, with a certain irony, slightly imitating Cecil's manner, "it means something to eat for these ladies."

"I accept," said Cecil. And he rang the bell.

II.

"Lecky," Cecil said to his valet, who had entered the room, "I want you to go to No. 155, Rue de la Paix, and find out on which floor they are disposing of seats for the Opéra to-night. When you have found out, I want you to get me four seats — preferably a box. Understand?"

The servant stared at his master, squinting violently for a few seconds. Then he replied suddenly, as though light had just dawned on him. "Exactly, sir. You intend to be present at the gala performance?"

"You have successfully grasped my intention," said Cecil. "Present my card." He scribbled a word or two on a card and gave it to the man.

"And the price, sir?"

"You still have that blank cheque on the Crédit Lyonnais that I gave you yesterday morning. Use that."

"Yes, sir. Then there is the question of my French, sir, my feeble French — a delicate plant."

"My friend," Belmont put in. "I will accompany you as interpreter. I should like to see this thing through."

Lecky bowed and gave up squinting.

In three minutes (for they had only to go round the corner), Lionel Belmont and Lecky were in a room on the fourth floor of 155, Rue de la Paix. It had the appearance of an ordinary drawing-room, save that it contained an office table; at this table sat a young man, French.

"You wish, messieurs?" said the young man.

"Have the goodness to interpret for me," said Lecky to the Napoleon of Anglo-Saxon theatres. "Mr. Cecil Thorold, of the Devonshire Mansion, London, the Grand Hotel, Paris; the Hôtel Continental, Rome, and the Ghezireh Palace Hotel, Cairo, presents his compliments, and wishes a box for the gala performance at the Opéra to-night."

Belmont translated, while Lecky handed the card.

"Owing to the unfortunate indisposition of a Minister and his wife," replied the young man gravely, having perused the card, "it happens that I have a stage-box on the second tier."

"You told me yesterday ——" Belmont began.

"I will take it," said Lecky in a sort of French, interrupting his interpreter. "The price? And a pen."

"The price is twenty-five thousand francs."

"Gemini!" Belmont exclaimed in American. "This is Paris, and no mistake!"

"Yes," said Lecky, as he filled up the blank cheque, "Paris still succeeds in being Paris. I have noticed it before, Mr. Belmont, if you will pardon the liberty."

The young man opened a drawer and handed to Lecky a magnificent gilt card, signed by the Minister of Fine Arts, which Lecky hid within his breast.

"That signature of the Minister is genuine, eh?" Belmont asked the young man.

"I answer for it," said the young man, smiling imperturbably.

"The deuce you do!" Belmont murmured.

So the four friends dined at Paillard's at the rate of about a dollar and a-half a mouthful, and the mystified Belmont, who was not in the habit of being mystified, and so felt it, had the ecstasy of paying the bill.

III.

It was nine o'clock when they entered the magnificent precincts of the Opera House. Like everybody else, they went very early — the performance was not to commence until nine-thirty — in order to see and be seen to the fullest possible extent. A week had elapsed since the two girls had arrived from Algiers in Paris, under the escort of Cecil Thorold, and in that time they had not been idle. Kitty Sartorius had spent tolerable sums at the best modistes, in the Rue de la Paix and the establishments in the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, while Eve had bought one frock (a dream, needless to say), and had also been nearly covered with jewellery by her betrothed. That afternoon, between the bet and the dinner, Cecil had made more than one mysterious disappearance. He finally came back with a diamond tiara for his dear journalist. "You ridiculous thing!" exclaimed the dear journalist, kissing him. It thus occurred that Eve, usually so severe of aspect, had more jewels than she could wear, while Kitty, accustomed to display, had practically nothing but her famous bracelet. Eve insisted on pooling the lot, and dividing equally, for the gala.

Consequently, the party presented a very pretty appearance as it ascended the celebrated grand staircase of the Opéra, wreathed to-night in flowers. Lionel Belmont, with Kitty on his arm, was in high spirits, uplifted, joyous; but Cecil himself seemed to be a little nervous, and this nervousness communicated itself to Eve Fincastle — or perhaps Eve was rather overpowered by her tiara. At the head of the staircase was a notice requesting everyone to be seated at nine-twenty-five, previous to the arrival of the President and the Imperial guests of the Republic.

The row of officials at the control took the expensive gilt card from Cecil, examined it, returned it, and bowed low with an intimation that he should turn to the right and climb two floors; and the party proceeded further into the interior of the great building. The immense corridors and foyers and stairs were crowded with a collection of the best-known people and the best-dressed people and the most wealthy people in Paris. It was a gathering of all the renowned. The garish, gorgeous Opéra seemed to be changed that night into something new and strange. Even those shabby old harridans, the box-openers, the ouvreuses, wore bows of red, white and blue, and smiled effusively in expectation of tips inconceivably large.

"Tiens!" exclaimed the box-opener who had taken charge of Cecil's party, as she unlocked the door of the box.

And well might she exclaim, for the box (No. 74 — no possible error) was already occupied by a lady and two gentlemen, who were talking rather loudly in French! Cecil undoubtedly turned pale, while Lionel Belmont laughed within his moustache.

"These people have made a mistake," Cecil was saying to the ouvreuse, when a male official in evening dress approached him with an air of importance.

"Pardon, monsieur. You are Monsieur Cecil Thorold?"

"I am," said Cecil.

"Will you kindly follow me? Monsieur the Directeur wishes to see you."

"You are expected, evidently," said Lionel Belmont. The girls kept apart, as girls should in these crises between men.

"I have a ticket for this box," Cecil remarked to the official. "And I wish first to take possession of it."

"It is precisely that point which Monsieur the Directeur wishes to discuss with Monsieur," rejoined the official, ineffably suave. He turned with a wonderful bow to the girls, and added with that politeness of which the French alone have the secret: "Perhaps, in the meantime, these ladies would like to see the view of the Avenue de l'Opéra from the balcony? The illuminations have begun, and the effect is certainly charming."

Cecil bit his lip.

"Yes," he said. "Belmont, take them."

So, while Lionel Belmont escorted the girls to the balcony, there to discuss the startling situation and to watch the Imperial party drive up the resplendent, fairy-like, and unique avenue, Cecil followed the official.

He was guided along various passages and round unnumbered corners to the rear part of the colossal building. There, in a sumptuous bureau, the official introduced him to a still higher official, the Directeur, who had a decoration and a long, white moustache.

"Monsieur," said this latter, "I am desolated to have to inform you that the Minister of Fine Arts has

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withdrawn his original invitation for Box No. 74 to-night."

"I have received no intimation of the withdrawal," Cecil replied.

"No. Because the original invitation was not issued to you," said the Directeur, excited and nervous. "The Minister of Fine Arts instructs me to inform you that his invitation to meet the President and their Imperial Majesties cannot be bought and sold."

"But is it not notorious that many such invitations have been bought and sold?"

"It is, unfortunately, too notorious."

Here the Directeur looked at his watch and rang a bell impatiently.

"Then why am I singled out?"

The Directeur gazed blandly at Cecil. "The reason, perhaps, is best known to yourself," said he, and he rang the bell again.

"I appear to incommode you," Cecil remarked. "Permit me to retire."

"Not at all, I assure you," said the Directeur. "On the contrary. I am a little agitated on account of the non-arrival of Mademoiselle Malva."

A minor functionary entered.

"She has come?"

"No, Monsieur the Directeur."

"And it is nine-fifteen. Saprستي!"

The functionary departed.

"The invitation to Box No. 74," proceeded the Directeur, commanding himself, "was sold for two thousand francs. Allow me to hand you notes for the amount, dear monsieur."

"But I paid twenty-five thousand," said Cecil, smiling.

"It is conceivable. But the Minister can only concern himself with the original figure. You refuse the notes?"

"By no means," said Cecil, accepting them. "But I have brought here to-night three guests, including two ladies. Imagine my position."

"I imagine it," the Directeur responded. "But you will not deny that the Minister has always the right to cancel an invitation. Seats ought to be sold subject to the contingency of that right being exercised."

At that moment still another official plunged into the room.

"She is not here yet!" he sighed, as if in extremity.

"It is unfortunate," Cecil sympathetically put in.

"It is more than unfortunate, dear monsieur," said the Directeur, gesticulating. "It is unthinkable. The performance must begin at nine-thirty, and it must begin with the garden scene from 'Faust,' in which Mademoiselle Malva takes Marguerite."

"Why not change the order?" Cecil suggested.

"Impossible. There are only two other items. The first act of 'Lohengrin,' with Madame Félice, and the ballet 'Sylvia.' We cannot commence with the ballet. No one ever heard of such a thing. And do you suppose that Félice will sing before Malva? Not for millions. Not for a throne. The etiquette of sopranos is stricter than that of Courts. Besides, to-night we cannot have a German opera preceding a French one."

"Then the President and their Majesties will have to wait a little, till Malva arrives," Cecil said.

"Their Majesties wait! Impossible!"

"Impossible!" echoed the other official, aghast.

Two more officials entered. And the atmosphere of alarm, of being scotched, of being up a tree of incredible height, the atmosphere which at that moment permeated the whole of the vast region behind the scenes of the Paris Opéra, seemed to rush with them into the bureau of the Directeur and to concentrate itself there.

"Nine-twenty! And she couldn't dress in less than fifteen minutes."

"You have sent to the Hotel du Louvre?" the Directeur questioned despairingly.

"Yes, Monsieur the Directeur. She left there two hours ago."

Cecil coughed.

"I could have told you as much," he remarked, very distinctly

"What!" cried the Directeur. "You know Mademoiselle Malva?"

"She is among my intimate friends," said Cecil smoothly.

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"Perhaps you know where she is?"

"I have a most accurate idea," said Cecil.

"Where?"

"I will tell you when I am seated in my box with my friends," Cecil answered.

"Dear monsieur," panted the Directeur, "tell us at once! I give you my word of honour that you shall have your box."

Cecil bowed.

"Certainly," he said. "I may remark that I had gathered information which led me to anticipate this difficulty with the Minister of Fine Arts ——"

"But Malva, Malva — where is she?"

"Be at ease. It is only nine–twenty–three, and Mademoiselle Malva is less than three minutes away, and ready dressed. I was observing that I had gathered information which led me to anticipate this difficulty with the Minister of Fine Arts, and accordingly I took measures to protect myself. There is no such thing as absolute arbitrary power, dear Directeur, even in a Republic, and I have proved it. Mademoiselle Malva is in room No. 429 at the Grand Hotel, across the road. . . . Stay, she will not come without this note."

He handed out a small, folded letter from his waistcoat pocket.

Then he added: "Adieu, Monsieur the Directeur. You have just time to reach the State entrance in order to welcome the Presidential and Imperial party."

At nine–thirty, Cecil and his friends were ushered by a trinity of subservient officials into their box, which had been mysteriously emptied of its previous occupants. And at the same moment the monarchs, with monarchical punctuality, accompanied by the President, entered the Presidential box in the middle of the grand tier of the superb auditorium. The distinguished and dazzling audience rose to its feet, and the band played the National Anthem.

"You fixed it up then?" Belmont whispered under cover of the National Anthem. He was beaten, after all.

"Oh, yes!" said Cecil lightly. "A trivial misconception, nothing more. And I have made a little out of it, too."

"Indeed! Much?"

"No, not much! Two thousand francs. But you must remember that I have been less than half an hour in making them."

The curtain rose on the garden scene from "Faust."

IV.

"My dear," said Eve.

When a woman has been definitely linked with a man, either by betrothal or by marriage, there are moments, especially at the commencement, when she assumes an air and a tone of absolute exclusive possession of him. It is a wonderful trick, which no male can successfully imitate, try how he will. One of these moments had arrived in the history of Eve Fincastle and her millionaire lover. They sat in a large, deserted public room, all gold, of the Grand Hotel. It was midnight less a quarter, and they had just returned, somewhat excited and flushed, from the glories of the gala performances. During the latter part of the evening, Eve had been absent from Cecil's box for nearly half an hour.

Kitty Sartorius and Lionel Belmont were conversing in an adjoining salon.

"Yes," said Cecil.

"Are you quite, quite sure that you love me?"

Only one answer is possible to such a question. Cecil gave it.

"That is all very well," Eve pursued with equal gravity and charm. "But it was really tremendously sudden, wasn't it? I can't think what you see in me, dearest."

"My dear Eve," Cecil observed, holding her hand, "the best things, the most enduring things, very often occur suddenly."

"Say you love me," she persisted.

So he said it, this time. Then her gravity deepened, though she smiled.

"You've given up all those — those schemes and things of yours, haven't you?" she questioned.

"Absolutely," he replied.

"My dear, I'm so glad. I never could understand why ——"

"Listen," he said. "What was I to do? I was rich. I was bored. I had no great attainments. I was interested in life and in the arts, but not desperately, not vitally. You may, perhaps, say I should have taken up philanthropy. Well, I'm not built that way. I can't help it, but I'm not a born philanthropist, and the philanthropist without a gift for philanthropy usually does vastly more harm than good. I might have gone into business. Well, I should only have doubled my millions, while boring myself all the time. Yet the instinct which I inherited from my father, the great American instinct to be a little cleverer and smarter than someone else, drove me to action. It was part of my character, and one can't get away from one's character. So finally I took to these rather original 'schemes,' as you call them. They had the advantage of being exciting and sometimes dangerous, and though they were often profitable, they were not too profitable. In short, they amused me and gave me joy. They also gave me you."

Eve smiled again, but without committing herself.

"But you have abandoned them now completely?" she said.

"Oh, yes," he answered.

"Then what about this Opéra affair to-night?" She sprang the question on him sharply. She did her best to look severe, but the endeavour ended with a laugh.

"I meant to tell you," he said. "But how — how did you know? How did you guess?"

"You forget that I am still a journalist," she replied, "and still on the staff of my paper. I wished to interview Malva to-night for the Journal, and I did so. It was she who let out things. She thought I knew all about it; and when she saw that I didn't she stopped and advised me mysteriously to consult you for details."

"It was the scandal at the gala performance last autumn that gave me an action for making a corner in seats at the very next gala performance that should ever occur at the Paris Opéra," Cecil began his confession. "I knew that seats could be got direct from more or less minor officials at the Ministry of Fine Arts, and also that a large proportion of the people invited to these performances were prepared to sell their seats. You can't imagine how venal certain circles are in Paris. It just happened that the details and date of to-night's performance were announced on the day we arrived here. I could not resist the chance. Now you comprehend sundry strange absences of mine during the week. I went to a reporter on the Echo de Paris whom I knew, and who knows everybody. And we got out a list of the people likely to be invited and likely to be willing to sell their seats. We also opened negotiations at the Ministry."

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"How on earth do these ideas occur to you?" asked Eve.

"How can I tell?" Cecil answered. "It is because they occur to me that I am I — you see. Well, in twenty-four hours my reporter and two of his friends had interviewed half the interviewable people in Paris, and the Minister of Fine Arts had sent out his invitations, and I had obtained the refusal of over three hundred seats, at a total cost of about seventy-five thousand francs. Then I saw that my friend the incomparable Malva was staying at the Ritz, and the keystone idea of the entire affair presented itself to me. I got her to offer to sing. Of course, her rival Félise could not be behind her in a patriotic desire to cement the friendliness of two great nations. The gala performance blossomed into a terrific boom. We took a kind of office in the Rue de la Paix. We advertised very discreetly. Every evening, after bidding you 'Good-night,' I saw my reporter and Lecky, and arranged the development of the campaign. In three days we had sold all our seats, except one box, which I kept, for something like two hundred thousand francs."

"Then this afternoon you merely bought the box from yourself?"

"Exactly, my love. I had meant the surprise of getting a box to come a little later than it did — say at dinner; but you and Belmont, between you, forced it on."

"And that is all?"

"Not quite. The minions of the Minister of Fine Arts were extremely cross. And they meant to revenge themselves on me by depriving me of my box at the last moment. However, I got wind of that, and by the simplest possible arrangement with Malva I protected myself. The scheme — my last bachelor fling, Eve — has been a great success, and the official world of Paris has been taught a lesson which may lead to excellent results."

"And you have cleared a hundred and twenty-five thousand francs?"

"By no means. The profits of these undertakings are the least part of them. The expenses are heavy. I reckon the expenses will be nearly forty thousand francs. Then I must give Malva a necklace, and that necklace must cost twenty-five thousand francs."

"That leaves sixty thousand clear?" said Eve.

"Say sixty-two thousand."

"Why?"

"I was forgetting an extra two thousand made this evening."

"And your other 'schemes'?" Eve continued her cross-examination. "How much have they yielded?"

"The Devonshire House scheme was a dead loss. My dear, why did you lead me to destroy that fifty thousand pounds? Waste not, want not. There may come a day when we shall need that fifty thousand pounds; and then _____"

"Don't be funny," said Eve. "I am serious — very serious."

"Well, Ostend and Mr. Rainshore yielded twenty-one thousand pounds net. Bruges and the bracelet yielded nine thousand five hundred francs. Algiers and Biskra resulted in a loss of _____"

"Never mind the losses," Eve interrupted. "Are there any more gains?"

"Yes, a few. At Rome last year I somehow managed to clear fifty thousand francs. Then there was an episode at the Chancellory at Berlin. And _____"

"Tell me the total gains, my love," said Eve — "the gross gains."

Cecil consulted a pocket-book.

"A trifle," he answered. "Between thirty-eight and forty thousand pounds."

"My dear Cecil," the girl said, "call it forty thousand — a million francs — and give me a cheque. Do you mind?"

"I shall be charmed, my darling."

"And when we get to London," Eve finished, "I will hand it over to the hospitals anonymously."

He paused, gazed at her, and kissed her.

Then Kitty Sartorius entered, a marvellous vision, with Belmont in her wake. Kitty glanced hesitatingly at the massive and good-humoured Lionel.

"The fact is _____" said Kitty, and paused.

"We are engaged," said Lionel. "You aren't surprised?"

"Our warmest congratulations!" Cecil observed. "No. We can't truthfully say that we are staggered. It is in the secret nature of things that a leading lady must marry her manager — a universal law that may not be

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transgressed."

"Moreover," said Eve later, in Cecil's private ear, as they were separating for the night, "we might have guessed much earlier. Theatrical managers don't go scattering five-hundred pound bracelets all over the place merely for business reasons."

"But he only scattered one, my dear," Cecil murmured.

"Yes, well. That's what I mean."