

OFFENBACH

MARRIAGE BY LANTERN

(one act)

English Version by Donald Pippin

Offenbach -- Paris! The two words often seem synonymous. But the true Parisian has a passion for getting out of the city. He dreams of a place in the country, an idyllic setting much like the one before us -- a modest farmhouse with geraniums in the windows, a barn, both of them dwarfed by a magnificent elm tree.

Here plump chickens seem to live in perfect harmony with placid cows that graze in a meadow just around the corner. Happy pigs partake of the trough. On a perfect spring morning like this, it's hard to imagine that life could go anything but smoothly. But I keep forgetting that it's also inhabited by people . . .

SCENE: a farmhouse, a barn, and a big elm tree. Denise, a very pretty girl, shy and modest, has paused for a moment, when Girard, a young farmer, enters.

GIRARD: And just what do you think you're doing, besides staring into space?

DENISE: Nothing, cousin, nothing at all ...

GIRARD: So I see. Something on your mind?

DENISE: Well, not exactly, cousin ...

GIRARD: Nothing important, that's for sure. What about the chickens, the cows, the pigs? Do you expect them to fix their own meals?

DENISE: Oh, no, cousin, but ...

GIRARD: And what about the socks that you started knitting yesterday? Are they done yet?

DENISE: Well, not quite ...

GIRARD: Just as I thought. And here it is, already the middle of the morning, seven o'clock, and what have you to show for it? Dreaming the hours away, like a lady of leisure! And on top of that, such a long face! It's enough to scare the devil ...

DUET, GIRARD and DENISE:

GIRARD Now what would Uncle Albert say
At tears of sorrow on display?
At doleful looks and tears of sorrow on display?
I want to see you right away
Be bright and sunny, light and gay.
I want to see you bright and sunny, light and gay.
So tell me what you've done today.
You gave the horses
Their exact amount of hay?

DENISE Yes, my cousin.

GIRARD The parlor and the kitchen floors
You finished up
Before beginning heavy chores?

DENISE Yes, my cousin.

GIRARD You put the pudding in the pot
And pared potatoes
For the partridge, did you not?

DENISE Yes, my cousin.

GIRARD In other words, do I return
To a house in order,
Top to bottom, stem to stern?

DENISE Yes, my cousin.

GIRARD Then why are you not satisfied?
For doing well,
Your bosom ought to swell with pride.
For doing well. your bosom
Ought to swell with proper pride.
Yet what would Uncle Albert say
About your state of disarray?
About your melancholy state of disarray?

Though you have not a thing to fear,
Am I correct
When I detect a hidden tear?

DENISE No, my cousin.

GIRARD I'm not the cause of your complaint.
I've got the patience
And compassion of a saint.

DENISE Yes, my cousin.

GIRARD You leave me groping in the dark.
Why are you not
As happy as a meadow lark?

DENISE Well, my cousin ...

GIRARD I merely wish to emphasize
The time is ripe
For you to wipe those bleary eyes.

DENISE Yes, cousin dear ...

GIRARD Though none would call me hard to please
With weeping women
I am seldom at my ease.
With weeping women
I am almost never at my ease.
For what would Uncle Albert say
To see this heavy cloud of gray?
To see this heavy overhanging cloud of gray?

GIRARD: So let's get on with it! The chickens, the cows, the pigs, the knitting,
the ironing. And don't forget the dishes. Well ... what's the problem?
(she leaves hurriedly)

(turning to audience) I know what you're thinking. You find me unsympathetic, some kind of an ogre, a brute, a male chauvinist pig. Well, don't go by first impressions. I have my reasons to talk to the girl this way. It's to keep her on her toes. All for her own good. Hard work is the best way ever invented for keeping a girl in line and out of mischief. Nothing chauvinistic about that.

Yes, I'm just a marshmallow – I'd hate to see her turn out badly, I really would. After all, she *is* my cousin. You see, Uncle Albert is her uncle, too, and he left me in charge of her when he moved to Paris. Things were going along pretty smoothly, no cause for complaint, till about two weeks ago. I happened to be passing by the post office. With my own eyes, I distinctly saw her drop a letter into the box. Aha, said I to myself. You don't have to tell *me* who she's writing to: Grenville!

Here's how I know: four times they danced together at the Sunday night assembly. Four times! Who else could it be? I ask you, why should girls be taught how to write? One of Uncle Albert's odd ideas. Well. You can imagine that when she got home from the post office, I lit into her. I told her it was no good trying to deceive me. I had found out everything. So what does she do? Starts to cry. But I stuck to my guns. I told her flat out: you are writing to that skunk Grenville. She denies it. I tell her that I *saw* the letter. And can you believe it? I never did get her to admit it. These young girls are cagy. The minute you turn your back. But how can she be so foolish? Why could she want to get mixed up with a smooth talker like him? Oh, he has polished manners. He's learned city ways. I suppose he's not bad looking. He knows how to bait the hook. The rat! I don't want to see her unhappy. She really is a sweet girl ... I wonder what she's up to now. *(he also leaves hurriedly in the same direction)*

Enter Fanny and Kitty, both widows of indeterminate age, in the midst of a conversation about a favorite topic.

KITTY: You, too?

FANNY: Yes, I, too, am thinking of getting married again. The question is, where to find a suitable husband?

KITTY: Look around. There's no shortage of men.

FANNY: Yes, but all the men have such a shortage of money. Girard, for example.

KITTY: That idiot! That country bumpkin! Don't make me laugh. Yes, we can do better than that. All the same, I do believe that the booby is in love with me.

FANNY: Then I am much afraid that you are mistaken. I have reason to believe that it is *I*

KITTY: And what gives you that strange notion?

FANNY: A girl usually knows. Saturday morning, when I was leaning over the well, he gave me a big slap on the back. I almost fell in. I think he was trying to tell me something.

KITTY: Sorry to disillusion you, but I, too, can recognize the signs. Little things. Sunday afternoon at the deacon's tea party, just as I was about to sit down with my cup of tea, the silly boy pulled the chair away. I fell smack on the floor. So playful and affectionate. However, I make no claim on him. He's yours for the asking. A present from me.

FANNY: Much obliged, but no thanks. Keep him for yourself. With my compliments.

KITTY: And what should I do with him? He hasn't a sou. In fact, he's even worse off than my late husband. Once was enough.

FANNY: Your late husband! I thought you were devoted to him.

KITTY: I am devoted to his *memory*. And you? I hear that you and your dear, departed husband were mad about each other.

FANNY: So we were. For nearly a month.

KITTY: Ah, the hazards of life! I married to find peace, comfort, harmony ...

FANNY: And I, for excitement, challenge, stimulation ...

DUET: KITTY & FANNY

KITTY

Marriage for some is a source of delight;
Mine was a battle from morning till night.
Never a moment of peace and repose;
Talk of the weather would bring us to blows.
Frankly, I paid an exorbitant price
For flowers, a cake, and a handful of rice.

Handsome though hot-headed
Was this fireball that I wedded.

Nonetheless –

Nonetheless –

Pelted by passion, fire, thunder,
Now am I coming out from under.

Married, alas, with so little to show for it,
Given the chance, once again I would go for it.

FANNY (*spoken*) A hot-headed husband! How I envy you!

Marriages differ, as all would agree;
Mine was a terminal case of ennui.
Militant ladies, O pity my plight!
I had a husband unwilling to fight.
Milder than sugar and water combined,
The mixture was driving me out of my mind.

Gentle, sweet, and adoring,
But incredibly boring!

**Not once do I remember
This iceberg losing his temper.
Nonetheless –
Nonetheless –
Starving for passion, fire, thunder,
Now am I coming out from under.**

**Married, alas, with so little to show for it,
Given the chance, once again I would go for it.**

GIRARD (*emerging from the barn with a jug of wine*) **Now where the devil could she have gone to? Nowhere to be found. (*indicating jug*) But this I did find. Uncle Albert's favorite.**

KITTY: Speaking of sunshine. Good morning, Girard.

GIRARD: Kitty, Fanny.

KITTY: What have you there? (*aside, to Fanny*) **He looks stupider than ever.**

FANNY: (*aside, to Kitty*) **He looks more and more like a goat! (*they both laugh*)**

GIRARD: These merry widows! (*joining in*) **Ha ha ha!**

KITTY: I believe he's tipsy.

FANNY: How can one tell?

GIRARD: (*overhearing*) **Me, tipsy? Hardly. Even if I do have enough worries to drive anybody to drink.**

FANNY: Worries? What can a man like you be worried about?

GIRARD: It's been two weeks since I wrote to Uncle Albert ... and no answer.

FANNY: Hm! That sounds like you are asking him for something.

GIRARD: Well, I certainly wouldn't be writing to *give* him something.

KITTY: I take it this is not the first time that you have extracted money from the poor man.

GIRARD: Poor? Him? That's a joke! Listen, my little lambkins, Uncle Albert is rich enough to buy this whole village.

FANNY: Strange, I never knew that your uncle speculated in property.

GIRARD: Who needs property? He's got gold, everything he touches, like King Midas. And he's never refused his dear nephew – so far. But this time maybe I stepped over the line.

KITTY: Next time you might ask him for a little sense. That would be a gift you could use.

GIRARD: Ah, Kitty! How clever you are.

KITTY: A slight difference between you and me.

FANNY: Oh, Kitty, what a wicked tongue! *(again they laugh, again Girard joins in)*

GIRARD: These merry widows! *(Denise rushes in)*

DENISE: Cousin! Cousin!

GIRARD: Ah, there you are! And about time! Where have you been? What have you been doing? What have you to say for yourself?

DENISE: I was at the post office.

GIRARD: The post office! It seems to me that you are spending most of your time these days at the post office.

DENISE: There was a letter ...

GIRARD: From Grenville! I thought as much!

DENISE: Oh, no, cousin!

GIRARD: Do you think I can't read? Show me the letter.

DENISE: Certainly, cousin. I was bringing it to you. The letter is for *you*.

GIRARD: For me? Well, that puts a different light on things.

FANNY: From your uncle, perhaps?

GIRARD: *(with deep emotion)* Look! From Paris!

KITTY & FANNY: Open it! Open it at once! Read it! What does it say?

DENISE: *(aside)* From Uncle Albert! Dear God! He writes to him as well ...

I hope he doesn't mention ... Oh, my goodness! *(she runs off in confusion)*

TRIO: GIRARD, KITTY, FANNY

FANNY

It brings good news!
Why not read it aloud?

KITTY

Of course! Why not?
Three is hardly a crowd.

GIRARD

I hardly dare ...
This could be the answer
That saves me on the spot.
My request he may be granting,
But on the other hand –
Maybe yes, maybe not!

FANNY

There's a way to find out.

KITTY

There's a way to find out.

FANNY

Past a shadow of doubt.

KITTY

Past a shadow of doubt.

GIRARD

You're right! You're right!
Here goes ...

“My dear nephew ...”
So far, so good. A promising start.
Affectionate, friendly and from the heart.
“My dear nephew:
So now you mean to marry
And settle down ...”
Lord! Who'd ever guess?

KITTY & FANNY

Read on!

GIRARD

A man with heart of gold.
O lucky me! The answer is yes!

KITTY & FANNY

Tell us more! Tell us more!

GIRARD

You read. But wait!
Listen instead. I'll proceed.
“In need of aid, you sent a letter

To ask a gift, at least a loan.
Ah, but I'll do even better,
And lead you to a treasure
Nor you nor I can measure,
A fortune close at hand
That you can claim for your own."

KITTY & FANNY

Claim a fortune!

GIRARD

For my own!

FANNY

For your own!

KITTY

For your own!

GIRARD

**What a blessing unforeseen!
Better than riches a man could inherit.
And the wife I choose to share it
Will live as happy as a queen,
As happy as a queen.**

FANNY

As a queen!

KITTY

As a queen!

FANNY & KITTY

**With a treasure at hand, I find
He is more the man I had in mind.
To his charms I have been blind,
Till now so blind!
Yet a woman, a woman
Can change her mind.**

GIRARD (*simultaneously*)

**With a treasure at hand, I find
A world of hope and joy combined.**

FANNY & KITTY

**Were I the niece of such an uncle,
Blessed with all the wherewithal,
Perhaps on me his eye would sparkle;
At my feet the gold would fall.**

GIRARD (*simultaneously*)

**O lucky me! Such an uncle!
Blessed with all the wherewithal,
For on me his eyes now sparkle;
At my feet the gold will fall.**

GIRARD: Good old Uncle Albert! He always comes through. A treasure ... for me!
A genuine treasure. His own words.

KITTY: A treasure! Really, this young farmer is not as stupid as I thought.

FANNY: A treasure! All things considered, this young man is not unattractive.
He grows on one.

KITTY: There is a sparkle in the eye ...

FANNY: Character in the nose ...

GIRARD: Now it's possible for me to get married!

KITTY: Married!

FANNY: Of course, and high time. Just as we have often tried to tell you.

KITTY: And when a man is rich, he doesn't have to look far.

FANNY: Sometimes right in front of his very nose ...

GIRARD: I didn't finish reading ... Maybe Uncle Albert will say where I'm to
find the treasure. *(reading)* " Under the big elm beside the barn, tonight when the
evening bell tolls ..." Aha! *(The ladies are edging closer)* Aren't we inquisitive!
A treasure, just at the right time. Come, let's drink to Uncle Albert's health.
Join me for a glass of wine. Denise! Glasses!

FANNY: *(aside)* Under the elm ... I shall be there.

KITTY: *(aside)* When the evening bell tolls ... I shall be listening.

GIRARD: *(aside)* After dark, with shovel in hand ... Denise!

DENISE: *(returning)* Here you are, cousin.

FANNY & KITTY: Let me pour.

KITTY: I'll do it.

FANNY: No, I'll do the honors.

GIRARD: Ladies! Ladies! Let's not quarrel. Denise, you pour.

DRINKING SONG

GIRARD When the sheep are back from the meadow,
When the chicks are safe in the nest,
Round the hearth while breaking the bread, oh
That's the time I'm at my best.

ALL If God were not for making merry,
Would He have made the wine to flow? NO!
A glass or two in necessary
For the pursuit of happiness. YES!

Come along, come along!
Let's combine wine and song.
If God believed in melancholy –
Yes or no, make a guess –
Would He have made the wine so good?
If He were down on feeling jolly,
Would we stay sober as we should?
No, no, no, no, no!

GIRARD Dry and thirsty, then I am gloomy,
Down on life, my fire burning low.
But one swallow does something to me;
After a glass, on with the show!

ALL If God were not for making merry, *etc.*

GIRARD Never mind the year on the label;
Name the color red, white or blue.
Gather round me here at the table,
Friends, one and all – you, you and you!

ALL If God were not for making merry, *etc.*

GIRARD: So, how do you like my song? And how do you like my wine? Or need I ask? Hm, maybe I've had a little *too* much. Better go work it off. By by, Kitty. *(kisses her)* Just for you. By by, Fanny. *(kisses her)* Just for you. Cheerio! Tra la la la! *(he saunters off)*

DENISE: And no kiss for me. *(Sadly, she goes back into the house.)*

KITTY: How can you cheapen yourself by allowing him to kiss you like that?

FANNY: I didn't notice you putting up much resistance.

KITTY: That's because he kissed me *first*.

FANNY: You change your tune mighty quickly, now that you see a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

KITTY: Lucky man! You were giving him away so generously.

FANNY: And now you are trying to latch on to him.

KITTY: It was embarrassing to see the way you threw yourself at him.

FANNY: Somebody has to protect him from a gold-digger like yourself.

KITTY: Who was it that was looking around for a rich husband?

FANNY: Who was it that wouldn't even dream of marrying a poor farmer like Girard?

KITTY: He should be told the nasty things you've been saying about him.

FANNY: It was you who called him an idiot.

KITTY: It was you who called him a goat.

FANNY: No, dear, that was you.

KITTY: No, you!

FANNY: It was you!

BOTH: Indeed!

DUET: KITTY and FANNY

BOTH

What a perfect little lady!
Oh, so prim and proper!
Hell or heaven couldn't stop her
Snatching at the rich.

Decent folk no doubt would dub her
Just a money grubber.
Greedy, grabby, this unhappy
Woman is a witch.

Spare me from this phony

Talk of matrimony.
Oh, I so dislike her,
I've a mind to strike her.
I detect a plan
To catch an unsuspecting man.

KITTY Till lately so disdainful,
You found his manners painful.

FANNY And you would never stoop
To such a nincompoop.

KITTY The truth you cannot hide;
You want to be his bride.

FANNY It's clear, my dear, that he
Could do far worse than me.
I frankly must confess,
My answer will be yes.

KITTY I'd caution you to wait
Before you celebrate.

BOTH What a perfect little lady! *etc.*

KITTY If you put your cash on
Stirring up his passion,
You go much against the odds,
Much against the odds.

FANNY Faith can move a mountain,
Though I wouldn't count on
Gifts denied you by the gods,
Denied you by the gods.

KITTY Blinded though by Cupid,
Could he be so stupid?

FANNY If he only knew you,
Soon would he see through you.

KITTY Age and looks apart,
Few men with acumen
Would offer you their heart,
Much less hand and heart.

BOTH

**How can it be
That he would choose her over me?**

**I am seething, getting hotter,
Any minute
I could haul off and swat her.**

**Take that, for your vanity!
Take that, for your jealousy!
Take that, for stupidity!
Take that, for indecency!**

**Of my rising wrath beware
Before I drag you by the hair.**

The Constable shows up.

CONSTABLE: What's this? Two ladies having a learned discussion. This bears looking in to. What's going on?

KITTY & FANNY: Oh, Constable!

FANNY: So much to tell you about.

KITTY: Girard's Uncle Albert ...

FANNY: Girard received a letter ...

KITTY: A letter this very morning ...

FANNY: A letter from his Uncle Albert ...

KITTY: Who lives in Paris ...

FANNY: A letter informing him ...

KITTY: That under this very tree ...

FANNY: The elm beside the barn ...

KITTY: This evening he will find ...

FANNY: When the evening bell is sounding ...

KITTY: Hush! Someone's coming.

CONSTABLE: Will find WHAT?

FANNY: My, aren't we being inquisitive. Come! *(the three hurry off)*
(Denise enters, reading from a letter she is holding.)

DENISE: "I know why you are unhappy, dear Denise ... you need a husband, a good husband." *(with a sigh)* A husband! "And I'm taking it upon myself to send you one. This evening at dusk, when the evening bell is sounding, go and sit at the foot of the big elm beside the barn." Uncle Albert is making fun of me! I never asked him for a husband. And I don't want one, unless ... but no! It's Fanny or Kitty that he's interested in, not me. But it's getting dark. The evening bell should be sounding any minute. I'll sit here at the foot of the tree and see if Uncle Albert will keep his promise. Why not?

QUARTET: EVENING BELLS

DENISE, *followed by the others in turn*

**When the evening bell is sounding
Day slips away; night is at hand.
All alone, my heart is pounding
As quiet falls on the land.**

GIRARD **So dark, quiet and deserted,
No one around,
The only sound
The tolling bell.**

DENISE **My day has been exhausting ...**

GIRARD **The place where I'm to find it ...**

FANNY & KITTY **He comes to hunt the treasure.**

DENISE **I must not fall asleep ... *(she falls asleep)***

GIRARD **A treasure chest, buried deep
(he starts to dig)
Drat it! I am not digging for pleasure.
Curses! Here I find nothing at all.
Drat it! Not even a trace of a treasure!**

FANNY & KITTY **Lie low and listen ...**

GIRARD **Here is the place where I was told.
Here is the tree; where is the gold?**

Good heavens! Here's my cousin.

FANNY & KITTY **How so? How so?**

KITTY **His cursed cousin!**

FANNY **His cursed cousin!**

KITTY **Fast asleep!**

FANNY **Fast asleep!**

GIRARD **Fast asleep!**

GIRARD **Close at hand, by her side,
My reward I shall reap.
Here she lies, so sweet, soft-spoken ...
Her weary eyes I dare not open.**

DENISE (*half asleep*) **Girard ... my dear Girard!**

GIRARD **Thinking of me, while dreaming ...
She calls me.**

FANNY & KITTY **Clever vixen! Ever scheming!**

GIRARD (*observing the letter in her hand*)
**What is this? Something new?
In her hand, a letter ...
The question is, from who?
From a friend, from a lover?**

FANNY **Dynamite!**

GIRARD **I shall read it.**

KITTY **Serves her right.**

GIRARD **Lord! My eyes play tricks on me!
A letter signed, in Uncle Albert's hand.
"The husband you love wholeheartedly
Beneath the tall, spreading tree
Tonight will appear --- Wait for him there,
Wait for him there."**

DENISE *followed by others* **While the evening bell is sounding,**

Not alone, my heart is pounding, *etc.*

GIRARD (*reading*) “He need but open up his eyes
To find out where his treasure lies.”

GIRARD: My treasure! *Now I’m beginning to understand!*

DENISE: (*half-awake*) Is someone here? Is it you, my husband?

GIRARD: (*kneeling*) Yes, Denise, here I am.

DENISE: Girard ...

GIRARD: Yes, your foolish Girard, who loves you, dear little Denise, and is asking you to be his wife, if you’ll take a knucklehead who doesn’t even recognize his own treasure till somebody points it out to him.

KITTY & FANNY (*coming forward*) Aha! What’s this?

GIRARD: Ah, Kitty and Fanny! Out for an evening stroll? May I present --- my wife!

MUSIC

KITTY & FANNY: Your wife!

FANNY: And what about the treasure?

GIRARD: I’ve got it safely tucked away.

KITTY: You might at least split it two ways.

FANNY: Three ways!

GIRARD: Four ways!

CONSTABLE: (*returning*) Five! But no more.

KITTY & FANNY: Oh, Constable!

KITTY: Girard has found a treasure.

BOTH: Just like that! This evening! He admits it!

KITTY: It belongs to the community. You must force him to give it up.

