

BALL OF THE CENTURY

On the Regie Canal, Venice, the Labia Palace is transformed for one night into a scene of 18th century glory. To the landing-stage, where a costumed footman lights their way, come a thousand guests by gondola to be received by Lady Duff Cooper on behalf of their host. Planned as a friendly house-warming to his many friends by Don Carlos de Bostegui (here in short sleeves and looking as though everyone's arrived too soon) the party turns out to be the Ball of the Century. Guests vie with each other in the rich splendour of their costumes. Here comes Barbara Hutton in black velvet. Designer Jacques Fath and his wife are the Sun and the Moon.

Can't pierce that disguise, but this is the Aga Khan in full oriental splendour and this is Orson Welles - that was! They're all wearing masks which were customary in the 18th century - but some are very thin - you'd spot lovely Irene Dunne anywhere.

Only 700 guests were invited, so there must be at least 300 gate-crashers, but everything's going with a swing and that's the only thing that's come unstuck so far, in a night that brings back to Venice the splendours of her past.