

ACT I.

SCENE I.

Firmin the father, and Charles Firmin.

Charles. What a lucky accident! — Just imagine, father!

Firmin. What is the matter?

Charles. I have found her again.

Firmin. Whom?

Charles. Charlotte. Since I've come to Paris, I have in vain been looking for her in all public places — and the first time I entered your office, I had the good fortune to meet her.

Firmin. But how? —

Charles. Only imagine! This charming young lady, whom I met at her aunt's house at Colmar — this Charlotte, whom I love and shall eternally love — she is the daughter —

Firmin. Of whom?

Charles. Of your chief, the new minister — I only knew her by the name of Charlotte. —

Firmin. She is the daughter of?

Charles. Of Mr. de Narbonne.

Firmin. And you love her still?

Charles. More than ever, dear father — she did not recognise me, I think; I was just going to bow to her, as you entered — and it was just as well that you stopped me; for what could I have

said to her? She must have perceived my confusion, which would have betrayed my feelings — I cannot master myself any longer. For the last six months that I have been separated from her, she has been my only thought — the burthen, the soul of my poems — To her alone belongs the applause that has been bestowed on me; for my love is the god who inspired me.

Firmin. A poet and a lover persuades himself of many things, when he is twenty years of age — I, too, have wasted my verses and my time, when I was your age — It is a pity that with the beautiful illusion the best part of life vanishes — And if that love had, at least, even a slight shadow of a chance — but to strive after what one can never attain! — Charlotte Narbonne is the daughter of a rich and noble man, — all our riches consist in my position, and your pay as lieutenant.

Charles. But is not that a little your own fault, dear father? Excuse me! With your abilities, what might you not aspire to! If you would but assert your own worth, you might, perhaps, be minister yourself, instead of being his clerk, and your son might, without hesitation, raise his claims to Charlotte.

Firmin. According to your opinion, your father is the greatest genius. Let that be, my son; I know better what I am worth. I have some experience and skill — but how many other men, far superior to myself, remain in obscurity, and see themselves displaced by impudent upstarts. — No, my son, don't let us attempt to be soaring too high.

Charles. But don't let us have too slight an opinion of ourselves! How! Should you not be

worth infinitely more, than this Selicour, your superior, — this conceited blockhead, who was all-powerful under the late minister, who ingratiated himself into his favour by every kind of baseness — who conferred appointments, obtained pensions by artifice, and who has even now already, as I hear, acquired the greatest influence under the new minister?

Firmin. What have you against this Selicour? Are not his duties discharged as they ought to be?

Charles. Yes. Because you assist him. — You cannot deny that you do three fourths of his work.

Firmin. We must mutually oblige one another. If I perform the duties of his office, he often performs also those of mine.

Charles. Quite right; therefore, you should be in his place, and he in yours.

Firmin. I won't oust anybody from his position, and I gladly remain where I am, in obscurity.

Charles. You ought to aspire to as high a position as you can — that you kept yourself in the background under the late minister is an honour to your character, and for that I admired you all the more — You were too noble to wish to gain by artifice what was due to your merit. But Narbonne, they say, is an excellent man, eager to reward true merit wherever he finds it, and to do what is right. Why will you still leave the field to incapacity and intrigue from motives of excessive modesty?

Firmin. Your zeal induces you to exaggerate Selicour's faults, and my merit. Granted that Selicour aspires too high, considering his moderate talents, he is honest, and means well. — Let him do his work himself, or get it done by another —

provided it be done; and supposing he be worth less, am I on that account worth more? Does any merit accrue to me from his want of it? Until now, I have been quite satisfied in my obscurity, and have not striven after a higher aim. Shall I, at my age, change my mind? My position, you say, is too bad for me! Be it so! It is much better than if I were too bad for it.

Charles. And thus I should have to give up all hope of Charlotte?

SCENE II.

La Roche. The two Firmins.

Firmin. Is not that La Roche?

La Roche (*low-spirited*). He himself.

Firmin. So melancholy? What is the matter with you?

La Roche. You are going to the office. How happy you are! I — I will enjoy the fine morning, and take a walk on the ramparts.

Firmin. La Roche! What does that mean? Should you no longer —

La Roche (*shrugging his shoulders*). No longer — my place has been given to another. — I was discharged last night.

Charles. For Heaven's sake!

La Roche. My wife knows as yet nothing about it, don't tell her, pray; she is ill, and it would be her death.

Charles. Never fear. She shall hear nothing from us.

Firmin. But tell me, La Roche, how —

La Roche. Have they the slightest reproach to make me? I will not praise myself, but I can keep a register and carry on the correspondence, I think, as well as another. I am not in debt; and my moral conduct has been unexceptionable. I am the first that comes to the office, and the last that leaves it, and yet I have been dismissed.

Firmin. Who knows you, must testify —

Charles. But who can have done you this bad turn?

La Roche. Who? It is a friendly turn done by that Selicour.

Charles. Is it possible?

La Roche. I have it from good authority.

Firmin. But how? —

La Roche. This Selicour and I are natives of the same village, as you know. We are of the same age. What little writing he can do, he has learnt from me, for my father was organist in our village. I paved the way for him in his office. By way of thanks he now discharges me in order to put some cousin or other of the new minister's valet in my place.

Charles. A nice little scheme!

Firmin. But could no remedy be found?

La Roche. That I expect from you, Mr. Firmin! — I just wanted to apply to you — You are an honest man. — Now, listen to me! I don't care so much about my situation, but I will revenge myself. This insolent knave, who is so submissive and cringing towards his superiors, thinks he can trip up a poor wretch like me with impunity. — But take care, friend Selicour! — The despised opponent

shall show you to your cost that two can play at that game. — And even were I to lose my position and my chance of employment for ever, I must have my revenge! I will give my life for my friends, but my enemies shall have cause to remember me.

Firmin. Not so, dear La Roche! — to forgive and forget is the revenge of an honest man.

La Roche. No compassion, Sir, with these rogues! To expose the iniquity of scamps, is doing a good and meritorious action. His post, as you well know, belongs to you by all that is lawful and right, and that for more than one reason. But work, sweat, toil and moil, as much as you like, you have all the same spent your time and trouble in vain. Who cares for your merit? Who troubles himself about it? — Sneak, flatter, cringe, fawn, that recommends the man! That is the way to happiness and honour! — This Selicour has done so, and you see how well off he is in consequence!

Firmin. But don't you wrong this good man, dear La Roche?

La Roche. I — wrong him! Well, well, I don't pretend to be a profound judge of human nature, but this Selicour, I see through him thoroughly! I have — I don't know myself as well as I know him. Already at school, one could see what a nice fellow he would turn out! He was continually sucking up to the master, played the eaves-dropper, flattered, knew how to appropriate other boys' merits and how to put his hands into other people's pockets. He shrunk from no act of baseness in order to insinuate himself and sneak into some other person's favour. When he grew older, he carried it on, on

a larger scale. At one time he played the hypocrite, at another the joker, as it suited the time; and he knew how to sail with every wind. Don't imagine that I calumniate him! We know, how it went on under the late minister — well he is dead — I will not speak ill of him in any way. — But how well did this Selicour understand to minister to his foibles and vices in the most shameful manner! — And no sooner had the minister fallen than he was the first to leave and deny him.

Charles. But how can he keep his ground with the new minister, who is so worthy a man?

La Roche. How? By hypocrisy. He knows how to accommodate himself to others, and to change his character according to circumstances. — He does not mind even doing a good action, when there is something to be gained by it, as well as committing a piece of knavery, when it answers his purpose.

Charles. But Mr. Narbonne has a penetrating mind and will soon have found out his man.

La Roche. That is just what he is afraid of — But empty as his head is of all useful knowledge, it is full of knavish tricks. — For example, he plays the overworked and busy man, and, in this way, he knows how to escape every searching conversation where his ignorance could be brought to light. Besides, the plans he is hatching are anything but little; I know them perfectly, although he thinks to conceal them in the depth of his heart.

Firmin. How so? What plans are they?

La Roche. Narbonne, who, at present, exerts a great influence on the government, is trying to

find an able person for an important embassy. He has the appointment in his gift; whomever he recommends, will obtain it. This Narbonne has also an only daughter, seventeen years of age, beautiful and amiable, and immensely rich. — Now if, by obtaining so high a post, this Selicour succeeds in getting out of the country and out of the sight of the clear-sighted, discerning minister, he can, with the aid of a clever and discreet secretary, conceal his ignorance for a long time. But even if it finally be brought to light, as it certainly will be, what does that matter to the son-in-law of the minister? The minister must therefore be gained over first, and that's why he assumes the air of an expert diplomat. The minister's mother is a good-natured, garrulous old lady, who pretends to be very clever and prides herself upon music. — He has insinuated himself with this old woman, told her charades and sonnets, yea the blockhead has even had the impudence to play of an evening airs and songs with her upon the guitar. The young lady has read novels; to her he plays the part of the sentimental lover, and thus he has become the declared favourite of the whole house, doted on by the mother and highly regarded by the daughter. The embassy is as sure to him, as if he had got it already, and he will shortly propose for the daughter.

Charles. What do you say? Could he really have the boldness to propose for Charlotte?

La Roche. Most certainly, believe my word.

Charles. Charlotte, whom I love! whom I adore!

La Roche. You love her? You?

Firmin. He is mad! he is not in his senses! Don't listen to him.

La Roche. What do I hear! Is it possible? — No, no, Mr. Firmin! This love is no folly — wait a bit, it may lead us to something — This love comes very handy, it exactly suits my plans.

Charles. What is he dreaming of?

La Roche. This Selicour is blown up! blown up, I say — quite lost! In his ambitious designs, the father shall cut him out; in his love, the son.

Firmin. But I beg you —

La Roche. Only leave it to me! leave it to me, I say. And sooner or later you shall be ambassador, and Charles shall marry Miss Charlotte!

Charles. I, marry Charlotte?

Firmin. I, ambassador?

La Roche. Well! well! Why not? You deserve it more, I think, than this Selicour.

Firmin. Dear La Roche! Before you procure us such high positions, I think it would be better to try to regain your own.

Charles. That is just like our friend! so he is! Always enterprising, always forming plans! But that is not enough! Their execution requires dexterity and prudence — and that our friend takes it so easily, has got him into great scrapes before now.

La Roche. It is possible that I promise perhaps more than I can accomplish. But all I see, enlivens my hope, and making an attempt can do no harm. — For myself, I would on no account consent to plot or intrigue; but to sap the position of this Selicour and blow him up, and thereby, to render my friends a service, — that is laudable as

well as delightful, that affords me a heavenly pleasure — and the success is not to be doubted.

Firmin. Not to be doubted? Is then your plan already settled?

La Roche. Settled — how? I have as yet not even thought about it, but time enough to do all that by-and-by.

Firmin. Well! — well! This dangerous plan is not yet far advanced, I see.

La Roche. Don't trouble yourself. I shall come off with honours; this Selicour shall not get the better of me, that he shall not, I warrant — What is the use of roundabout ways? I take a straightforward one, and go myself to the minister; it is not difficult to be admitted, he loves justice, and can bear to hear the truth.

Firmin. How? What? You would dare?

La Roche. Why! I am not afraid — I fear nobody — in a word — I'll speak to the minister — I'll open his eyes. — He will see, how shamefully he is being deceived — that is the work of half an hour — Selicour must go, — must be ignominiously dismissed, and I enjoy the greatest triumph. — Yes I can't be sure but I may be sorry for the poor devil, when he must leave the house in such disgrace —

Charles. Whatever you may choose to do, dear La Roche! — at any rate, leave me and my love out of the affair. I hope for nothing — I dare not aspire so high! but for my father you can't do too much?

Firmin. Let me answer for myself, my friend! — You mean well, dear La Roche, but your good

intentions are running away with your discretion. What fantastical plan is this you have formed? A whimsical creation of fancy! — And even if the success were as sure as it is not, I should never give my assent to it. Those brilliant positions suit me no more than I suit them; inclination and destiny have marked out for me a more moderate sphere. Why should I change my place where I am happy? I hope the government will not seek me, I am too proud to ask humbly for an office — but still more so, to allow another one to beg for me. — Please, therefore, to attend to your own affairs! You have friends enough, every one of whom will gladly plead in your favour.

La Roche. Then you reject my services, both of you? — It does not matter! I'll make your fortune, whether you like it or not. (*Exit.*)

Firmin. He is a fool, but a good-natured one, and his misfortune affects me greatly.

Charles. Pity me too, dear father! I am more unhappy than he is. I shall lose my Charlotte!

Firmin. I hear some one coming — It is the minister with his mother — let us go! — I will avoid the very appearance of having placed myself in his way. (*Exeunt.*)

SCENE III.

Narbonne. Mrs. Belmont.

Mrs. Belmont. Has Mr. Selicour been here already?

Narbonne. I have not yet seen him to-day.

Mrs. Belmont. You must confess, my son, that you possess a real treasure in this man.

Narbonne. He seems to be very clever in his department, and as I find myself removed from my rural residence to this large town, and into so difficult a position where it is not enough to be a scholar, I must consider it very fortunate to have met with such a man as Selicour.

Mrs. Belmont. Who understands everything, and is versed in everything! Taste and knowledge — the most interesting conversation, the most agreeable talents, — music, painting, poetry, whatever one asks about, he is familiar with all.

Narbonne. Well, and my daughter?

Mrs. Belmont. Fortunate, that you remind me of it. She is seventeen years old; she has eyes; this Selicour has so many accomplishments — and he is gallant! His expression becomes animated in her presence. — Oh, it has not escaped me. This delicacy, those tender attentions that he shows her, are only one little step short of love.

Narbonne. Well, it would not be a bad match for our child! I don't care for the accidental advantages of birth; have I not myself worked my way up in the world? and this Selicour may with his genius, his knowledge, his honesty rise very high. I have myself thought of him concerning an honourable post, for which an able and worthy man is wanted. — Well! I will put his abilities to the test, if he proves himself, as I doubt not, worthy of such a post, and knows how to please my daughter, I shall joyfully accept him as my son-in-law.

Mrs. Belmont. That is my only wish! He is a very courteous, pleasant, and most charming man.

SCENE IV.

The same. Charlotte.

Charlotte. Good morning, dear father.

Narbonne. There you are, my child! — well, how do you like this large town?

Charlotte. Ah, I wish I were back again in the country — For here I must watch for an opportunity to see my father.

Narbonne. Yes, I myself miss my honest peasants. With them I jested and was happy — but I hope to be so here too. My new post shall not change my disposition; one can be a man of business, and still retain one's good humour.

Mrs. Belmont. This place charms me. I — I am here, as it were, in heaven. I am already acquainted with all the world — all are polite to me — and Mr. Selicour wanted to subscribe for me at the Lyceum.

Charlotte. Guess, grandmamma, whom I thought I have seen to-day! —

Mrs. Belmont. Whom?

Charlotte. The young officer —

Mrs. Belmont. Which officer?

Charlotte. Young Charles Firmin —

Mrs. Belmont. Who came every evening to your aunt at Colmar. —

Charlotte. Who always conversed with you. —

Mrs. Belmont. A polite young gentleman!

Charlotte. Is he not, grandmamma?

Mrs. Belmont. Who also composed such pretty verses.

Charlotte. Yes, yes, the same.

Mrs. Belmont. Well, since he is here, I suppose he will call upon us.

Narbonne. Where can Selicour be? He keeps us waiting this time.

Mrs. Belmont. There he is just coming.

SCENE V.

Selicour to the same.

Selicour (*bowing to all*). I am charmed to find you all together here.

Narbonne. Good morning, Selicour!

Selicour (*giving Narbonne some papers*). Here I bring you the essay spoken of. I thought it proper to add a few lines by way of explanation.

Narbonne. Excellent!

Selicour (*to Mrs. Belmont, giving her a ticket*). For you, Madam, I have secured a box for the new piece.

Mrs. Belmont. Charming!

Selicour. To the young lady I've brought this moral novel.

Charlotte. You have read it, I hope, already, Mr. Selicour?

Selicour. I have hastily skimmed over the first volume.

Charlotte. Well, and —

Selicour. You will find an affecting scene in it — An unhappy father — a degenerate daughter — helpless parents, deserted by ungrateful children — Horrors that I can't imagine, which I have no idea of! — For can the gratitude of our whole life compensate for the cares they bestow on our helpless childhood?

Mrs. Belmont. In all that worthy man says, he knows how to display great delicacy of feeling.

Selicour (*to Narbonne*). The place of a chief in our office must be filled up before long. The position is an important one, and there are a good many applicants.

Narbonne. I rely upon you; you will know how to examine the claims of each one of them, taking into consideration their time of service, their zeal, their abilities, and above all their honesty. But I forget I have to put my signature to several papers. I must be going!

Selicour. I will immediately go to my business too.

Narbonne. I beg you earnestly to await me here, I must have some talk with you! —

Selicour. But I really have a good many things to attend to before dinner.

Narbonne. Remain here, or come speedily back again, I require your presence. A man of your knowledge and honesty is just what I want! — I really mean well by you.

SCENE VI.

The same without Narbonne.

Mrs. Belmont. You cannot imagine, Mr. Selicour, how well my son thinks of you! But I have different things to attend to, I think. — Our relations and friends dine here this evening. — Shall we see you also, Mr. Selicour?

Selicour. I hope so, if my numerous engagements will allow —

Mrs. Belmont. Pray, don't fail to come, otherwise our party would lose its lustre. You are the

soul of our company! And Charlotte, I vouch, will be very much offended, if you don't come.

Charlotte. I, mamma? well, yes! your and papa's friends are always welcome to me.

Mrs. Belmont. All right! all right! — Now go and dress! it is quite time! — You must know, Mr. Selicour, that I superintend the toilet.

Selicour. Thus art comes to the help of natural beauty — who could resist it?

Mrs. Belmont. He is charming, quite charming! He never opens his mouth without saying something clever and courteous. (*Exit with Charlotte.*)

SCENE VII.

Selicour. Michel.

Michel (*entering*). She is gone at last! — Now I can put in a word, too! Have I the honour to speak with Mr. Selicour? —

Selicour (*rude and peevish*). That is my name!

Michel. Permit me, Sir!

Selicour. Must I be bothered even here? What do you want from me? —

Michel. Sir! —

Selicour. Sure to be some importunate petition, some request. — I cannot assist you. —

Michel. Allow me, Sir!

Selicour. Not at all! Here is not the place — you may come to my cabinet some of these days, and ask again! —

Michel. I had not expected so unkind a reception. —

Selicour. What do you want, Sir?

Michel. I do not come to beg for anything. I come to offer my humble thanks to Mr. Selicour!

Selicour. Thanks? For what?

Michel. For having procured my nephew a situation.

Selicour. What? How?

Michel. I arrived but yesterday in this house, because my master left me alone in the country. When I wrote to you, I had not the honour of knowing you personally.

Selicour. Indeed! my dear Sir, you are in the service of the minister?

Michel. His valet, if you please!

Selicour. Good Heavens, what an error! Mr. Michel, footman, valet, confidant of the minister. I beg a thousand pardons, Mr. Michel! indeed, I feel quite ashamed — I am inconsolable for having treated you so rudely. Upon my honour, Mr. Michel, I took you for a clerk.

Michel. And even if I were one! —

Selicour. We are beset by so many importunate intruders, and can't tell every body by his coat.

Michel. But one can be courteous towards all, I should think!

Selicour. True! true! It was an unfortunate inadvertence! —

Michel. A very unpleasant one for me, Mr. Selicour.

Selicour. I am sorry, very sorry, I can never forgive myself. —

Michel. Let us say no more about it!

Selicour. Well! well! I have shown you my zeal — the dear, dear nephew! he is now provided for!

Michel. I have just come from him! he is no fool, the lad is!

Selicour. The young man will make his way, you may rely upon me!

Michel. Does he not write a neat hand?

Selicour. Indeed, he does not write badly!

Michel. And his orthography —

Selicour. Yes, that's the thing.

Michel. Please, Mr. Selicour! you must not say anything to our gracious master about the letter I wrote you. When he went to town, he gave us strict orders not to ask for anything. — He is somewhat particular, our master is!

Selicour. Is he? indeed! indeed! You know the minister very well, do you?

Michel. As he is on familiar terms with his attendants, I know him thoroughly — and, if you wish it, I can give you full information about him.

Selicour. I believe you! I do indeed! But I am not very anxious to know, not at all! don't you see, Mr. Michel! My principle is, do right, fear nobody.

Michel. Well said!

Selicour. Well then, go on! continue, please, Mr. Michel! Your good master is somewhat particular, you say?

Michel. He is a little odd, but very kind. His heart is as pure as gold!

Selicour. He is rich, a widower, a pleasant gentleman, and still in the prime of his life. You need not fear to tell me openly, he is no hater of women, that dear, worthy gentleman.

Michel. He has a tender heart.

Selicour (*smiling cunningly*). Ah! ah! Some little love affairs, is it not so?

Michel. That may be, but he is on this point —

Selicour. I understand perfectly, Mr. Michel! You are modest, and know how to keep silence. — I ask with the best intentions of the world, for I am certain, one can hear nothing that does not do him honour.

Michel. Yes! listen! he is seeking a lodging in one of the suburbs.

Selicour. A lodging, and for whom?

Michel. That I will soon find out — but don't let it get abroad, do you hear? —

Selicour. God forbid!

Michel. He was gallant in his youth. —

Selicour. And you believe that there is still a lady-love of his —

Michel. Not exactly that! But —

Selicour. Be it as it may. As a faithful servant of the worthy gentleman, you must throw a charitable veil over his weakness. And why could it not be an act of benevolence that is to remain secret? Why not, Mr. Michel? I hate wicked insinuations. I hate to death anything that looks like slander. We must always believe the best of our benefactors. Well! well! We shall meet again, Mr. Michel! You have pardoned, I trust, the cold reception I gave you? Have you? — Upon my honour! I am quite ashamed of it still! (*Gives him his hand.*)

Michel (*declining*). Don't, don't, Mr. Selicour! I know my place, and know how to behave.

Selicour. No ceremony! Number me among your friends, I entreat you, Mr. Michel!

Michel. That I shall never dare to do — I am only a servant.

Selicour. My friend! my friend! No difference between us. I entreat you, Mr. Michel! —

(While they are bowing to each other, the curtain drops.)

ACT II.

SCENE I.

Narbonne and Selicour *(seated)*.

Narbonne. Are we alone at last?

Selicour *(uneasy)*. — Yes, Sir!

Narbonne. This conversation is of great importance to me. — I have already a very good opinion of you, Mr. Selicour, and am certain, it will greatly increase, before we separate. Well, to business, then, and away with false modesty. You are said to be very well versed in diplomacy and politics.

Selicour. I have occupied myself with it a good deal, and perhaps not without success. But I should not like, on that account, to be considered well versed in —

Narbonne. Well! well! First of all now let me hear — Which do you consider the foremost qualifications of a good ambassador.

Selicour *(hesitating)*. Above all things he must possess skill in the management of business.

Narbonne. Skill, yes, but skill that is always consistent with the strictest honesty.

Selicour. That is what I meant.