

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.

Narbonne. Go on.

Selicour. At the foreign court, to which he is accredited, he must try to ingratiate himself.

Narbonne. Yes! but without derogating from his own dignity. He must maintain the honour of the state which he represents, and gain respect for it by his behaviour.

Selicour. That is what I wanted to say. He must not allow himself to be slighted, and must know how to preserve his dignity.

Narbonne. His dignity, yes, but without presumption.

Selicour. Just so.

Narbonne. He must have a watchful eye on everything.

Selicour (*interrupting him*). He must have eyes everywhere; he must know how to find out the most covert secrets.

Narbonne. Without playing the spy.

Selicour. That is what I mean. — Without betraying an anxious curiosity.

Narbonne. Without *having* it — He must know how to keep silence, and preserve a modest retirement —

Selicour (*quickly*). His face should be like a sealed letter.

Narbonne. Without playing the secret-monger.

Selicour. That is what I mean.

Narbonne. He must possess a peaceful character, and every dangerous dissension must be —

Selicour. Avoided as much as possible.

Narbonne. Quite right. He must have an accurate knowledge of the population of the different countries —

Selicour. Of their situation — their produce — their imports and exports — their balance of trade.

Narbonne. Quite right.

Selicour (*in the heat of his speech*). Of their constitutions — alliances — resources — and of the strength of their military power.

Narbonne. For example, supposing it was Sweden or Russia where you were sent to — I presume you possess already the required knowledge of these states.

Selicour (*embarrassed*). I must confess that — I have occupied myself more with Italy. The north I know less of.

Narbonne. So! ay!

Selicour. But I am just on the point of studying it.

Narbonne. Well then, let us speak of Italy!

Selicour. The land of the Caesars, of course, engrossed my attention first. Here was the cradle of the fine arts, the country of heroes, the home of the most sublime virtue. What touching reminiscences for a feeling heart!

Narbonne. Well, well! But to return to our subject.

Selicour. Just as you please! Alas! the fine arts have so many attractions! They are so highly suggestive!

Narbonne. It is Venice that I am first thinking of.

Selicour. Venice! right! I have just commenced an essay about Venice wherein I am fully detailing everything. I'll hasten to fetch it. — (*Rises.*)

Narbonne. Don't! don't! A little patience.

SCENE II.

The same. Michel.

Michel. There is somebody at the door who asks for a private interview on some pressing business.

Selicour (*in great haste*). I will not be in the way.

Narbonne. No! stay, please, Selicour! This somebody will, I suppose, have a moment's patience.

Selicour. But — if it is urgent.

Narbonne. The most urgent affair now to me is our conversation.

Selicour. Allow me, but —

Michel. The gentleman said it would be finished in a few minutes, and was very pressing. (*Exit Selicour hastily.*)

Narbonne. Come back directly, please, when the visitor is gone.

Selicour. I shall be entirely at your commands.

Narbonne (*to Michel*). Let him enter.

SCENE III.

Narbonne and La Roche.

La Roche (*with many bows*). Am I not — I suppose — It is his Excellency, before whom I —

Narbonne. I am the minister. Draw near, please.

La Roche. I beg your pardon — I — I come — It is — I ought — I am indeed in some confusion — my great respect.

Narbonne. Ay, never mind your great respect, and come to the point! What brought you here?

La Roche. My duty, my conscience, the love of my country! — I have come to give you an important hint.

Narbonne. Well then, speak!

La Roche. You have put your confidence in a man who has neither ability nor conscience.

Narbonne. And who is this man?

La Roche. Selicour is his name.

Narbonne. What? Sel —

La Roche. In plain words. This Selicour is just as ignorant as he is mean. Allow me to give you a slight description of him.

Narbonne. A moment's patience! (*Rings. — Enter Michel.*) Call, Mr. Selicour!

La Roche. By no means, your Excellency! — His presence is not at all necessary during this conversation.

Narbonne. Not for you, perhaps, but that is my way. I take no accusation against people who can't defend themselves — When he confronts you, you may commence your description.

La Roche. But it is rather awkward in a man's presence —

Narbonne. When one has no proofs, to be sure — if that is the case with you —

La Roche. I had not counted upon telling it to his face. He is a knowing rogue, — a wary scamp. — Well, I don't mind, even to his face. — Hang it, I am not afraid of him — let him come. — You shall see that I'm not in the least afraid of him.

Narbonne. Well! well! We shall soon see. Here he comes.

SCENE IV.

The same. Selicour.

Narbonne. Do you know this gentleman?

Selicour (*much embarrassed*). It is Mr. La Roche.

Narbonne. I have sent for you, to defend yourself against him. He has come to accuse you. Please to begin now.

La Roche (*after coughing*). I must tell you then we were school-fellows, he perhaps owes me some thanks. We both commenced our career at the same time -- it is now fifteen years ago, that we both entered the same office as clerks. But Mr. Selicour got on brilliantly, and I — am still in the place where I started from. That he has forgotten these many years the poor devil who was his early friend, that may be! I have nothing to say against it. But to think of his old friend, after so long an oblivion, only for the purpose of depriving him undeservedly of his bread, as he has done, that is hard, that must needs exasperate me! He cannot bring the slightest accusation against me; but I say, and maintain boldly that this Selicour, who now plays the part of an honest man before your Excellency, acted the part of an out-and-out rogue, when he had the chance. Now he aids you in carrying out what is lawful and right; your predecessor, I know well, he has fairly assisted in all his mean doings. Like a thievish lackey, the hypocrite knows how to assume every time with the livery also the tone of his master. He is a flatterer, a liar, a boaster, an insolent fellow! Cringing and fawning, when he is seeking something, and haughty towards all who

have the misfortune to want him. When a boy he was still good-natured, but now he is far above this human weakness. He has sneaked now into a splendid berth, and I am certain that he is not fit for it. Upon himself alone he draws the eyes of his principal, and people of ability, of genius, men like Mr. Firmin, he does not allow a chance.

Narbonne. Firmin! How — Is Mr. Firmin in our office?

La Roche. An excellent man, you may well believe me.

Narbonne. I know him. — A first-rate man of business!

La Roche. And father of a family! His son made the acquaintance of your daughter at Colmar.

Narbonne. Charles Firmin! yes, yes, quite right.

La Roche. A young man of great parts.

Narbonne. Go on!

La Roche. Well, that's it! I have said enough, I think!

Narbonne (*to Selicour*). Defend yourself.

Selicour. I am accused of ingratitude. — I, of ingratitude! I should have thought that my friend La Roche ought to have known me better. It was owing to my want of influence and not to my good-will, that he has remained so long in obscurity. What a hard accusation against a man whom he has found faithful these twenty years! To yield so rashly to the impulse of his suspicion, to put the worst interpretation upon my actions, and to proceed against me with so much passion and malice! — As a proof of how truly I am his friend —

La Roche. He, my friend! Does he take me

for a fool? — And what proof has he given me of it.

Narbonne. He has allowed you to speak to the end.

La Roche. Then the matter will be decided against me!

Selicour. His place has been given to another, that is true, and none deserves this slight as little as he does. But I hoped that my friend La Roche, instead of bringing an accusation against me like an enemy, would have come to my room, and demanded an explanation from me. This, I confess, I had expected, and was already enjoying in advance the pleasure of the agreeable surprise I had prepared for him. What sweet joy for me to make him happy beyond all expectation! For that very post of a head of the office which your Excellency spoke of to-day, I wanted to propose my old friend La Roche.

La Roche. I, head of an office! Many thanks, Mr. Selicour! — I am a clerk, and anything but a man of business! It is my pen, and not my head, which must recommend me, and I am none of those who take a burden upon themselves to which they are not equal, in order to lay it secretly on the shoulders of another, and appropriate the merit of it themselves.

Selicour. The place suits you, my friend, believe me, I know you better than you do. (*To Narbonne.*) He is an excellent worker, accurate, indefatigable, and full of common sense; he deserves the preference before all his competitors. — He accuses me of hindering men of genius from getting on, and it is Mr. Firmin whom he mentions. This

example is not well chosen, however good the man is. In the first place, his present position is not bad, but he deserves, to be sure, a better one, and it is already found too — I just wanted to recommend Mr. Firmin to your Excellency as my successor, in case I should be removed to the post my kind patron designs me for. They assert that I am not fit for my present office. — I know well that I possess but moderate parts. — But they ought to reflect that this accusation touches more nearly my patron than myself. If I am really not fit for my office, the chief is to blame, who conferred it on me, and has so often expressed his satisfaction with my weak talents. — At last I am accused of having been the accomplice of the late minister. I made him hear the voice of truth; I boldly spoke the language of an upright man at a time when perhaps my accusers were grovelling before him in the dust. Dozens of times I was on the point of tendering my resignation to this incapable minister; nothing restrained me but the hope of serving my country. How sweet a reward for my heart to be able to prevent something bad being done here, and do some good there! I defied his power, and defended the good cause from his encroachments, whilst he was still at the head of affairs. He fell, and I felt the sincerest compassion for his misfortune. If that be a crime, I am proud of it and glory in it. — It is hard, very hard for me, dear La Roche, to see you amongst my enemies — to be obliged to defend myself against a man whom I esteem and love! — But come! let us make peace, give me back your friendship, and all shall be forgotten!

La Roche. The rogue! Why, he almost softens me.

Narbonne. Well, what have you to say to it?

La Roche. I, nothing! — The cursed villain nearly disconcerts me.

Narbonne. Mr. La Roche! It is brave and laudable fearlessly to attack a villain wherever he may be, and to proceed against him without forbearance — but obstinately to persist in one's unjust hatred, shows a wicked heart.

Selicour. He does not hate me! — not in the least! My friend La Roche has the best heart in the world! I know him — but he is hot-headed — he lives by his profession — that excuses him! He believed he lost his bread! I, too, have been in the wrong. — I confess it — Come! come! let me embrace you, all shall be forgotten!

La Roche. I, embrace him! never! — Though I don't know how he manages to deceive myself and your Excellency — but in a word! I persist in my accusation. — No peace between us, until I have unmasked him, and laid bare his whole wickedness!

Narbonne. I am convinced of his innocence, — unless facts, unexceptionable proofs convince me of the contrary.

La Roche. Facts! Proofs! Thousands for one!

Narbonne. Out with them!

La Roche. Proofs enough — a great many — but the thing is, I can't prove anything by them! There is no proving anything against such wily rogues. Formerly he was as poor as myself, and now he has great wealth! If I were to tell you that, by his former influence, he has made money, that

all his riches are derived therefrom — I certainly can't prove it under hand and seal, as the saying is — but God knows, it is the truth, I'll take my dying oath upon it.

Selicour. This accusation is of too base a kind to touch me. — However, I will submit to the strictest inquiry. — All I possess, is the fruit of fifteen years' hard work; I have acquired it by constant labour and night-watching, and, I think, I make no ignoble use of it. It supports my poor relations, and keeps my poor mother from want!

La Roche. Not true! Not true! I certainly can't prove it! but it is untrue, shamefully untrue!

Narbonne. Moderate yourself!

Selicour. My God! Must I live to hear such things? It is my friend La Roche, who uses me so unkindly. — What frenzy has seized upon you? I don't know whether to laugh or be angry at this fury. — But to laugh at the expense of a friend who considers himself insulted — no, I can't do it, that is too serious! — To mistake your old friend thus! — Come to yourself, dear La Roche, and don't, by unseasonable obstinacy, deprive yourself of such an excellent situation as I have intended you for.

Narbonne. To tell the truth, Mr. La Roche, this stubbornness gives me no good opinion of you. — Must I also beg you to be just to your friend? — Upon my honour! I heartily pity poor Mr. Selicour.

La Roche. That I can well believe, Sir! Has he not, in spite of my righteous indignation, nearly perplexed me for a moment! — But no, no! I know him too well — I am too certain of my case. —

War, war to the knife between us, and no reconciliation! Here, I see, all further conversation is in vain, but although the rogue drives me to extremes, I prefer a thousand times to starve than be under an obligation to him for my bread. My best respects to your Excellency! (*Exit.*)

SCENE V.

Narbonne. Selicour.

Narbonne. Do you comprehend this headstrong stubbornness —

Selicour. It does not matter. He is a good-natured fool! I will soon pacify him again.

Narbonne. He is rash and heedless, but he may be a good man at heart.

Selicour. A thoroughly kind-hearted man, I vouch — whose head, however, is a little deranged. It is possible that somebody else has set him against me.

Narbonne. Do you think so?

Selicour. There may be something at the bottom of it. — Who knows? Perhaps some secret enemy and envious person — for this poor fellow is only a tool.

Narbonne. But who could —

Selicour. There are many who desire my ruin!

Narbonne. Have you any suspicion?

Selicour. I suppress it! For to think anything like that of Mr. Firmin — Fie! Fie! that would be shameful! altogether impossible.

Narbonne. I think so too! The man appears to me far too honest and modest for that.

Selicour. Modest, yes, that he is!

Narbonne. You know him then?

Selicour. We are friends.

Narbonne. Well, what do you think of the man?

Selicour. Mr. Firmin, I must confess, is just the man one would wish to have in an office — although no great genius, still very clever at his work. — Not, indeed, that he is deficient in sense and knowledge — by no means! he may know a good deal, but he does not show it.

Narbonne. You make me eager to know him.

Selicour. I have entreated him over and over again to come out a little more — but perhaps he feels himself born for a subordinate position and for obscurity. But I will —

Narbonne. Don't trouble yourself. — One in my station can, without prejudice to his dignity, take the first steps towards a man of merit. — I will myself call upon Mr. Firmin. — But now to return again to our former subject, which this La Roche has interrupted.

Selicour (*embarrassed*). It is already rather late. —

Narbonne. That does not matter.

Selicour. It will now be time for the audience.

Narbonne (*looks at his watch*). Yes, indeed.

Selicour. We can leave it till to-morrow. —

Narbonne. Well! as you like.

Selicour. Then I will —

Narbonne. One word more.

Selicour. Sir?

Narbonne. I can at least commission you to do something that requires both ability and courage.

Selicour. Please to command!

Narbonne. My predecessor has, by his bad

administration, allowed a great many abuses to creep in, which, in spite of all our endeavours, have not yet been abolished. A memoir should, therefore, be drawn up, wherein all the defects are to be laid bare, and the full truth be unsparingly told to the government itself.

Selicour. But, begging your Excellency's pardon, such a memoir might have serious consequences both for its author and for yourself.

Narbonne. That does not alarm us. — No danger, no personal consideration can be taken into account where duty commands.

Selicour. That is a noble thought.

Narbonne. You are the man for this work. — I need not tell you any more about it. You know the evil as well as, and even better than, I do.

Selicour. And my opinion about it coincides, I hope, entirely with yours.

Narbonne. Without doubt! This business admits of no delay. I leave you; don't lose any time; now is the favourable moment — I should like to send it, if possible, this very day to the government. — It should be short and concise — much may be expressed in few words! Adieu! Set about it at once. (*Exit.*)

SCENE VI.

Selicour. **Mrs. Belmont.**

Mrs. Belmont. Are you alone, Mr. Selicour? I wanted to wait till he was gone — he must not know anything about it.

Selicour. What is it about, Madam?

Mrs. Belmont. We are going to give a little concert this evening, and Charlotte is to sing us something, too.

Selicour. She sings beautifully!

Mrs. Belmont. You write some verses now and then yourself? Don't you?

Selicour. Who does not make verses once in his life?

Mrs. Belmont. Well, please to write us a song or something of that kind for this evening!

Selicour. Do you mean a romance?

Mrs. Belmont. Well, we like romances particularly!

Selicour. If zeal could make up for want of genius —

Mrs. Belmont. Well! well! I understand.

Selicour. And I really want some light amusing work of that sort to divert myself a little. I have sat up all night looking through files of documents, and correcting accounts.

Mrs. Belmont. A disgusting occupation.

Selicour. That I really feel rather fatigued. — Who knows! The flower of poetry will, perhaps, refresh me with its lovely fragrance, and thou, balm of hearts, holy friendship!

SCENE VII.

The same. Robineau.

Robineau (*behind the scene*). Well, if he is in here, I shall also be allowed, I think —

Mrs. Belmont. What is the matter there?

Robineau (*entering*). This pack of flunkies give

themselves more airs than their masters. — I wish to speak with Mr. Selicour.

Selicour. I am Selicour.

Robineau. That I shall soon see. Yes, upon my honour, it's him! — the very man — I see him still romping with the boys in the village. — Look at me, — examine me well. I am somewhat changed, I dare say — Do you know me?

Selicour. No!

Robineau. Ay, ay, I am Christopher Robineau, son of the vine-dresser, who married the fat Madelon, your grandfather's cousin, Mr. Selicour!

Selicour. Ah, indeed!

Robineau. Well — Cousins usually embrace one another, I think.

Selicour. With pleasure, — be welcome, cousin!

Robineau. Many thanks, cousin!

Selicour. But let us go to my room — I am not at home here.

Mrs. Belmont. Never mind me, Mr. Selicour. Do as if I were not here.

Selicour. With your permission, Madam, you are too kind! One must excuse his simple manners, he is a good honest peasant, and a cousin whom I heartily love.

Mad. Belmont. That is just like you, Mr. Selicour!

Robineau. I have but this moment arrived, dear cousin!

Selicour. So, and where do you come from?

Robineau. Well, where else should I come from but our village. — But this Paris is really like twenty villages; I got out of the coach more than

two hours ago, and have been roaming about in search of you and La Roche, you know, your neighbour and school-fellow. Well, I have found you at last, and now it is all right!

Selicour. You come to Paris on business, cousin!

Robineau. On business! Fiddlesticks! I have some object though.

Selicour. And what may that be?

Robineau. Well, to make my fortune here, cousin!

Selicour. Ha! ha!

Robineau. Well, that business is important enough, I should think.

Selicour (*to Mrs. Belmont*). I beg your pardon!

Mrs. Belmont. He delights me.

Selicour. He is very amusing.

Robineau. Peter, the carter, said that the cousin had feathered his nest well in Paris. When he was still a little boy, the cousin, he had been a devil of a rogue; and people used to say "ill weeds grow apace — he is sure to make his way!" We had also heard of him, but the news were too good for us to believe. But when we could no longer doubt them, my father said to me: Go, Christopher, look up cousin Selicour in Paris, you will not regret the journey, — perhaps, you will make your fortune by a good marriage. — I set out at once, and here I am! Don't be offended, Madam! The Robineaus are quite plain-spoken; what the heart thinks, the tongue speaks — and when I saw the dear cousin there before me, you see, my heart overflowed.

Mrs. Belmont. Well, that is quite natural.

Robineau. I tell you, cousin, I should also like to make my fortune! you know the secret how to set about, pray, tell it me.

Selicour. Always be honest, faithful and modest! That is the whole of my secret, I have none other. — They are all well at home I trust?

Robineau. Thank God, yes. The family prospers. Bertrand has married his Susan, she will soon be confined, and hopes that the dear cousin will stand godfather. They are all going on very well, except your poor mother, — who thinks it hard that she should have to suffer want, whilst her son in Paris was enormously rich.

Selicour (*aside*). Hold your tongue, you blockhead!

Mrs. Belmont. What does he say about your mother?

Selicour (*aloud*). Is it possible? Those thousand thalers I sent her have not arrived? — That grieves me deeply! — How badly those post-offices are managed — the poor good mother! What she must have suffered!

Mrs. Belmont. Yes, indeed! She must be assisted.

Selicour. Of course, I will immediately ask the minister to give me leave of absence — it is a just request — I can insist upon it. — The duty of nature is paramount — I hasten to my native village — all will be done within a week! She would not come and live in Paris, although I begged her ever so much to do so! The dear old mother is too much attached to her native village.

Robineau. Then I can't make her out at all, for she told us she would have liked to have come

to Paris, but the cousin would not have it on any account!

Selicour. The good woman does not always know what she wants! — But to know her suffering want — oh God! that grieves me and pierces my heart.

Mrs. Belmont. That I can well believe, Mr. Selicour! — But you will soon have done what is needful. I'll go now and leave you alone with your cousin. — Happy will be the wife that calls you one day her own. So dutiful a son will certainly be a tender husband too! (*Exit.*)

SCENE VIII.

Selicour and Robineau.

Robineau. Upon my honour, dear cousin, I am quite astonished at you — I had not expected from you so hearty a reception. He is far too proud and haughty, they said, he will certainly not know you again!

Selicour (*after having looked, if Mrs. Belmont was really gone*). Tell me, you fool! What has entered your head, that you should come to bother me at this untimely hour!

Robineau. Well! well! as I have already told you; I came to make my fortune!

Selicour. To make your fortune! you blockhead!

Robineau. Indeed, cousin! How ill you use me — I won't stand being treated in this way.

Selicour. What, do you pretend to be offended? — what a pity to waste your anger! — To run away from his village to Paris! The sluggard!

Robineau. But what a behaviour all at once, dear cousin! First such a friendly reception, and now this rude way of speaking to me. — That is not acting in an honest and straight-forward manner, excuse me, that is double-dealing — and if I were to tell others how you treated me — it would not redound to your honour! No, it would not!

Selicour (*terrified*). Tell it to others! What!

Robineau. Yes, yes, cousin!

Selicour. If you dare, you lout! — I will get a place for you — I will provide amply for my mother. Be quiet! I will get you a situation, depend upon it.

Robineau. Well, if you do that —

Selicour. But we can't speak about it here! Be off, and come to my room!

Robineau. Yes, mind, cousin! I should like to get a quiet and comfortable berth! If you could get me some employment in the excise office.

Selicour. I'll put you in the right place, depend upon it. — To the village with that stupid boor, to the village as soon as possible! (*Exit.*)

ACT III.

SCENE I.

La Roche and Charles Firmin (*meet one another*).

La Roche. I have been looking for you some time. — I say! — Well, I have kept my word — I have given the minister a nice description of that Selicour.