

Act One: Scene One.
December 1st 1851.

An expensively appointed drawing room, in high Victorian style. It's comfortable without being ostentatious, the centre-piece of the room is a harpsichord with several easy chairs, an elegant man of about 40, dressed in full evening rig is playing a baroque piece by Pachabel.

A young man in his mid twenties enters breathless, he takes off his wet coat and top hat.

ALEXANDER: Have you any news?

MORNY: The country's going to Hell, the price of bread is high enough to cause a revolution, the workers are building barricades, it's December 1st, in the year of our Lord 1851, and I amuse myself by playing Pachabel.

ALEXANDER: Please your excellency, don't joke with me! Has the Prince President agreed?

MORNY: Not yet.

ALEXANDER: Not, but that's surely the end of all my hopes?

MORNY: My dear boy, you're exactly like your father, the patience of a bull in a china shop.

ALEXANDER: I'm not concerned about my father or the workers, I'm worried about me. Besides if I was my father, I wouldn't be in this position.

MORNY: Ah, M. DUMAS is a great man. As Shakespeare says some are born great, some grow great, some have greatness thrust upon them, your father did one better he made himself great; now that is extraordinary.

ALEXANDER: If it hadn't been for him I might never have met her and she's the cause of all of this.

MORNY: Marie had an effect on many, as I recall.

ALEXANDER attempts to speak but Morny waives him away.

MORNY: Marie kept a charming house and in those days I was not as you see me here. I had to make my own way in the world as you are now. I'm a success because of myself; you will be too.

ALEXANDER: Not if my play isn't performed.

MORNY: Nonsense, you have a great future ahead of you.

Interestingly, my brother understands the fragility of success better than any of us; you see he is one of those unfortunates who has had greatness thrust upon them.

ALEXANDER: The Prince-President...

MORNY: Did not seek to lead our cause, but more than anyone else, he sees with true clarity that we are all parvenu.

ALEXANDER: But sir, you're....

MORNY: Ilegitimate, I said it before, a half brother, born on the wrong side of the blanket, albeit with some unusual connections.

ALEXANDER: Sir, I meant your family yields to none in the land.

MORNY: My family were worth very little.

ALEXANDER: Your mother was a Queen and your uncle the most famous man in the world.

MORNY: That's the problem of royalty, ones whole life is lived in a glass cage. I think the happiest day of my mother's life was when she was deposed. *(Laughing)* I grant you her relations were unusual and I built my life on a chance association with my uncle and my brother. But my father was an adventurer, his father a bishop, not much of a start in life, the bastard son of bishop's bastard no less.

ALEXANDER: But what a bishop!

MORNY: You're a terrible flatterer Alex, just like your father - now we're on the subject- it's an artist's privilege I suppose.

ALEXANDER: *(A little hurt)* But sir, M. De Flauhaut was a famous man, one of the Emperor's finest soldiers, and the Prince de Talleyrand was a Minister of State.

MORNY: Yes, it's true, all of those things, how could I deny it. My point is this; both were men who had to make their own way in the world. But I'll give Grandpere one thing he did love us all in his own way, he never denied my father, me or my cousin Delacroix even if others did. Parenthood my dear boy is difficult, I'm one myself now, and I appreciate my own father much more, even if he is

a cantankerous old goat.

ALEXANDER: I never knew my father, at least until I came to Paris. I knew who he was, well everybody in the world knew my father. But he left my mother when I was very young, so I wasn't sure of my reception when I arrived to see him. I had some stories I'd written that I wanted him to read. Of course I didn't really expect that he would. Even now I'm not sure if it was my father's interest I wanted or the great writer's approval.

MORNY: Well you're not alone in that, confusion is that natural condition of relations between generations.

ALEXANDER: I went to his apartment, I didn't know what to expect, perhaps I thought he'd throw me out in the street, he has a famous temper.

MORNY: Fathers can be frightening, mine was, but he could also be wonderfully kind and funny.

ALEXANDER: It's strange I didn't miss mine when I was a boy, I had 'Maman; and grandfather, my mother's father, I never knew papa's side of the family. He paid for my education of course, but as Papa became more famous so I used to hear whispers, that's the Dumas bastard. It got so bad I asked mama once, straight out, am I a bastard? The poor woman was mortified, her own son accusing her like some gaggle of fishwives

MORNY: You at least were fortunate in that you lived with your poor mother. I was 10 before I saw mine for the first time and even then I did not know who she was until my father told me. Oh, I grant it was impossible to be acknowledged, to be anything other than a secret, I understand it now, but believe me it was hard to forgive her sometimes. I did in the end, but it was still hard.

ALEXANDER: I did not know.

MORNY: Why should you! I do not blame her or my father over much, they tried to do right by me, after all they both loved me in their own way. They were each other's great passion. Like ourselves they were victims of their own time, in a very real sense I suppose we all are. So you see my dear boy we're not so very different after all

ALEXANDER: You're right EXCELLENCY, me with no father, you without a mother, we aren't so very different.

MORNY: You found your father and finally I found my Mother; romantic but it doesn't necessarily make for a happy end.

ALEXANDER: Literature is kinder, there, you can remake the past and imagine a future without pain.

MORNY: Grandpere knew General Dumas did you know that?

ALEXANDER: No.

MORNY: Grandpere knew everyone in those days, he was still a bishop at the time and he knew the de la Pailletire family quite well; they were very eccentric, the old Marquise scandalized the world by marrying a black slave woman.

ALEXANDER: My grandmother, she was a Dumas.

MORNY: Quite, Grandpere said that the General had abandoned his birthright and joined the cause of the people, but he could never keep hold of his temper, which is why he fell foul of the Emperor.

ALEXANDER: Well my father has certainly inherited the disposition to a passionate let alone quarrelsome nature, he's always having feuds.

MORNY: M. Dumas cannot keep a quarrel going for long, that is his saving grace. My father, M. de Faluthaut once remarked to me that the mark of a gentleman is quickness to take offence but equal rapidity to forgive and he should know a thing or two about tempers, since he was a man who could never govern his own.

ALEXANDER: That first day I came to visit him. I fully expected M. Dumas to throw me out as an impostor, but he didn't. He read my mother's letter and for a long moment he said nothing, then he laughed, that amazing raucous laugh he has, as if the whole world should be laughing with him. That night he took me to dinner and introduced me as his son: it was so unexpected. Not long afterwards we visited her salon, that's where I first met her, in candlelight. She looked so pale; I never forgot it, that's why I described my Marguerite like that.

MORNY: Marie loved literature, but more, she loved the company of writers.

ALEXANDER: It's strange, she told me she couldn't read until she was 15.

MORNY: Perhaps not as strange as you think. We all hunger for some secret way into the garden of Eden, for Marie it was books. You must not think ill of her, in her own way she was a great lady.

ALEXANDER: Lady?

MORNY: Yes she had much delicacy, even if she was born in the gutter. She chose her own road and did not apologize for it. Alexander she was not quite a whore, please believe that. She allowed gentlemen to protect her, which is not much different from modern marriage, god help us. There is little enough chance for women in this life, at least Marie lived on her own terms.

ALEXANDER: And died on them too.

MORNY: You were not there.

ALEXANDER: To my disgrace.

MORNY: Well you've made amends, you have made poor Marie immortal, though I'm not sure she would thank you.

ALEXANDER: All my life I wanted to be a writer but I had nothing to write about. It's a condition of being twenty. But when she died I knew I had to write about our love.

MORNY: La Dame made me weep, I read it and I was glad I'd gone to see Marie at the end.

ALEXANDER: I never thanked you for visiting her, when all Paris would not. No one is more despised than a courtesan with debts.

MORNY: Pray do not be so harsh, it sounds so dreadfully moralising. I was not so careful of my reputation in those days, but I would have gone anyway. Marie was a good friend to me, and if the 'bon ton' of the Faubourgs denied her entry, well I don't think she cared over much.

ALEXANDER: You forced the church to give her a burial.

MORNY: Moralists as ever are ungenerous even, perhaps especially, in death. I simply told the bishop that he would get no favours from me, ever. Under those circumstances it helps to be the son of a queen. Besides, the revolution was happening and my brother's party were out campaigning for the Presidency.

ALEXANDER: You won excellency.

MORNY: In a manner of speaking, my brother is heir to a magic name, nothing else.

ALEXANDER: But such magic.

MORNY: Of course, my uncle's ghost still stalks the earth despite thirty years in the grave. Yet, even such a name would matter little, after all my brother twice attempted to overthrow the state, disastrously in both cases, without timing and opportunity: 48 gave us both.

ALEXANDER: Marie was dying and I was abroad, when I came back it was all over and her effects were up for auction.

MORNY: So that's where you got your famous scene.

ALEXANDER: I won't deny it. I tried to come back to see her.

MORNY: She spoke of you at the end. She told me that she had not wronged any man but you.

ALEXANDER: I could not bear the life she lived.

MORNY: I think she meant that she still loved you, but that she could not keep her love.

ALEXANDER: Nor I, but after, when we were apart I never stopped thinking about her. I wished so very much I could have seen her at the end.

MORNY: But you did, in literature at least.

ALEXANDER: That was more a wish, or a hope than anything else.

MORNY: It makes your story magnificent.

ALEXANDER: I don't know why I had to write it, all I know is that it drove me on, day after day, night after night, hour after hour until it was done. Six whole weeks of writing, almost as much time as I spent with her that summer.

MORNEY: So quick? I didn't know that artists were so speedy.

ALEXANDER: I could not sleep or eat, not until it was done. It was as if she were alive again. When I wrote the last line, I just lay my head on my writing desk and slept; I don't know how long, a long time, sitting at my table.

Marie was all around. I dreamt she was there, literally dancing with me in that tiny room.

MORNEY: Alex, my dear chap, prey don't distress yourself.

ALEXANDER: That's why I need to have it performed, it has to be real, for her and for me.

MORNY: I advise caution.

ALEXANDER: Caution is nothing in art, I've written a dozen books since then, but none have her power.

MORNY: Look about you, everything is in flux, winter is upon us; with bread scarce and prices rising, it could be 1789 all over again.

ALEXANDER: But the Prince will win any election.

MORNY: Perhaps, perhaps not, politics is a deadly business. We may not be allowed to contest an election, there are moves afoot in the chamber to limit him to a single term, which means our political life will be finished in within a year; to a man like my brother that would be worse than exile.

ALEXANDER: But how does my play affect the destiny of France?

MORNY: Alex, are you so naive? Literature has power, real power. Power to motivate men's minds for good or ill. A play such as yours could be construed as encouraging immorality. That is a powerful tool in the hands of our enemies, and we have so many, both left and right. That is why I urge you to caution, it's not that my brother isn't willing to authorize you, but he must proceed slowly.

ALEXANDER: My hopes are at an end, my career is finished.

MORNY: Young men, you see only in black and white.

The door opens and a big man dressed in evening clothes enters. He seems to fill the room. It's Alexander Dumas, France's most celebrated writer.

DUMAS: Bloody Christmas, bloody December, bloody cold, I hate the cold.

MORNY: These are uncertain times.

DUMAS: What have I to fear from the mob. I'm only a humble writer.

ALEXANDER: Humble father!

DUMAS: See what gratitude I get, sarcasm at my age, come here you rascal.

They embrace.

DUMAS: Well old friend, has the Prince President agreed to let my boy go on the stage, or are you just getting him to play politics with you?

MORNY: No.

DUMAS: Why the devil not! It's a good play; all my plays had the support of the regime, whatever it was.

MORNY: My dear Alex, you know as well as I do how dangerous the moment is; good or not, such a play is too inflammatory.

DUMAS: But what is to be done?

MORNY: My counsel is to wait. The censor refused it three times, but we do not control the public censors office, the chamber does. As I told your son, my brother wants it performed, as do I, but not now.

DUMAS: If not now when?

MORNY: My dear Alex, like Job, you do try the patience of god. Soon, when things have improved.

ALEXANDER: But how can they improve if the chamber wants to limit the Prince President's term?

MORNY: The chamber is like Cromwell's rump, men interested only in themselves: to them the Republic is a way of getting rich.

ALEXANDER: But if the Prince President can't allow my play to be performed, then who can?

DUMAS: I'll not have you play politics with my boy, I'm not a partisan of the government, but the Prince President should at least....

MORNY: There are higher authorities than that of a President.

ALEXANDER: Higher?

DUMAS: What was the river Caesar had to cross before he marched into Rome and plunged the world into civil war?

ALEXANDER: The Rubicon.

DUMAS: What higher authority!

ALEX: That...

MORNY: Is treason! But grandpere said, and he was in a better position than most to know, that treason is only a matter of timing.

Blackout: End of Scene 1

Act One: Scene Two
Early Spring 1844

The sitting room of Marie Duplessis's fashionable apartment in Paris. There is a fire at one side of the room and the centre is dominated by a round table with a large bowl of flowers. Above the fireplace is a portrait of MARIE DUPLESSIS complete with a camelia. At the moment there is a party in full swing in another room. Two elegant young women are standing by the fire. MARIE, a 20 year old brunett is dressed in her trademark red ball dress and her friend PRUDENCE, a blond, of about 18, is wearing white. Like her portrait MARIE has a white Camellia in her bosom. From off stage we can hear the muted sound of music and dancing.

PRUDENCE: You'll catch your death of cold.

MARIE: Don't fuss, darling, I want to enjoy myself, everybody is so happy. Can't I be too, just for one night?

PRUDENCE: I only meant.

MARIE: I know what you meant, but the Baron isn't here, is he? And if he never comes again, well that will simplify things.

PRUDENCE: You know best my dear, but...

MARIE: But nothing. I live as I choose, besides I haven't done too badly, for a girl just in off the street.

PRUDENCE: Marie!

MARIE: Don't be so coy Pru, we both know what we are.

PRUDENCE: But this is such a difficult life.

MARIE: What are you complaining about, you've got more admirers than I've had hot dinners, I have to work hard

at my men.

PRUDENCE: Well I'm younger than you.

MARIE: By 2 years.

PRUDENCE: (*Laughing*) Every little helps.

MARIE: How long have we known each other?

PRUDENCE: Since M. Reynards shop, I was eleven.

MARIE: Six years, that's a long time, let's not quarrel darling; not because of a man.

PRUDENCE: I only said the Baron...

MARIE: There you go again, the Baron wants too much, men always do.

PRUDENCE: Of course men want too much, but if they pay the bills they're entitled to ask something in return.

MARIE: But that's the problem, they never say how much they want, it makes life so irregular and I need some regularity in my existence. God, what am I talking about the last time I was regular, I was a grisette and sowed dresses for a living - ten hours a day regular. By night-times my fingers were so sore I swear blood dripped from them. You'd be so tired all you could do was fall asleep, one day after the next, regular as clockwork.

PRUDENCE: Well they do call it clocking in and clocking off.

MARIE: Oh, how I hated that bell, bells to wake up, bells to eat by, bells for everything, sometimes I felt like I was in the army.

PRUDENCE: Bonaparte couldn't have done any better.

MARIE: M. Reynard was probably on the retreat from Moscow, him and his bloody bells. Of course along with the bells we had to worry about him trying to grab your arse. God help you if M. Reynard got you alone in the store-room. Half the time I used to stand with my back to the wall. So I thought, if that sod can get away with pinching my bottom for nothing, then by heaven I'll have somebody pay for it. Even at 14 I realised a girl's only assets must be worth something.

PRUDENCE: It's no good snapping at me, I only said that the Baron will be upset if he hears about you gallivanting across town, especially if he continues to look after you in the manner to which you like to be accustomed.

MARIE: So I'm accustomed to live like an Empress, well so much the better for me. We weren't born to this, were we?

PRUDENCE: I can safely say we weren't.

MARIE: Do you want to go back to the way it was before?

PRUDENCE: God forbid, Rose. Besides M.Reynard had bad breath.

MARIE: There's my point!

PRUDENCE: He pinched my behind too, his fat fingers hurt quite a bit; I swear I was black and blue.

MARIE: Well, he didn't do that after I got finished with him.

PRUDENCE: You did box his ears rather bad.

MARIE: He was a disgusting old goat, chasing after young girls who couldn't say boo back.

PRUDENCE: I wonder about his wife, did she know?

MARIE: Of course she knew, she let him do it, the dried up old bitch.

PRUDENCE: She had to be 40 at least.

MARIE: More probably, I doubt he had his hand up her skirt for 10 years.

PRUDENCE: Well he put his hand up a lot of other skirts instead.

MARIE: That's all he could do, stick his sweaty palm up your dress; otherwise, he was no good, like most of them. All that grunting and the garlic, God!

PRUDENCE: I still have nightmares about the first time I saw his thing; made me think of uncooked sausage.

MARIE: Pru don't be so vulgar, we aren't in M. Reynard's store-room anymore and this isn't some back street brothel.

PRUDENCE: I don't see why I shouldn't be vulgar if I want to be.

MARIE: Oh, darling, it just means that you don't have any manners and where would we be without manners, no better than the sluts that walk the streets.

PRUDENCE: I couldn't ever do that.

MARIE: Who knows what we can do? When I met M. Arnaud, my first protector do you remember what I said?

PRUDENCE: That it didn't matter what happened because you were a dead woman already.

MARIE: Well it still doesn't matter because I'm still a dead woman. This life of ours may not be the best, but it's better than most, besides we meet so much more interesting people. Anyway, it won't last that long so we should enjoy it while we can.

PRUDENCE: Have you been sick again?

MARIE: Half the morning, but I'm all right now. I just felt a little cold so I came in here to warm myself up.

PRUDENCE: This life will kill you.

MARIE: Perhaps, but it hasn't yet and the old one certainly would have finished poor Rose by now.

Marie starts to cough, Prudence holds a handkerchief to her face.

MARIE: See what you made me do, with your talk of death.

PRUDENCE: You should take better care of yourself darling.

MARIE: I need, I need, I need a drink.

Prudence laughs and goes into the other room. Wiping her mouth Marie throws the bloody linen into the fire. She steps back and puts her hands across her face in pain. Prudence comes back into the room, followed by Dumas, Alexander and a waiter with a bottle of Champagne and glasses.

PRUDENCE: Darling look who I've discovered.

Instantly Marie puts on her professional face, a grande dame of the world.

MARIE: *(Smiling)* M. Dumas.

DUMAS: Enchanté Madame (*He kisses her outstretched hand*)

The waiter hands around glasses of champagne.

DUMAS: Allow me to introduce my son.

MARIE: (*Surprised*) Your son!

PRUDENCE: We'd all heard the rumour M. Dumas, but...

DUMAS: Of course it's true, he rejoices' in the name of Alexander also! Mille Du Plessis, Alexander Dumas - well go ahead and kiss the lady's hand.

Alexander has been looking somewhat distracted, he bends forward and gently touches Marie's fingers with his lips. The effect should be both touching and elegant.

DUMAS: My son is of excellent address, even if I'm an ill bred ogre.

MARIE: My dear Dumas, you wrong yourself.

PRUDENCE: Indeed, all the world knows that M. Dumas has the best manners in Paris.

DUMAS: I can't talk for Paris, but society has no manners at all.

MARIE: You will not find much of the Faubourgs in my house; such as we are not welcome there.

PRUDENCE: Well, I'm welcome in a lot of places.

DUMAS: But that is why here is so delightful. Yesterday, I dined with Duchess this, tomorrow with Countess that, it's so boring, there I must be Alexander Dumas, lion of literature, but here I can be myself.

ALEXANDER: When are you not yourself father?

DUMAS: See what an ingrate I've reared. Wants to be a writer; he's got talent too.

MARIE: A writer Monsieur Alexander!

ALEXANDER: We all have ambitions, what are yours?

PRUDENCE: Mine is to be a queen in the theatre.

DUMAS: Do you act?

PRUDENCE: All the time.

DUMAS: Come tell me more.

They move downstage.

MARIE: Poor Pru, she never quite knows how to behave.

ALEXANDER: Nor I think, does my father.

MARIE: All Paris is awash with rumour about M. Dumas' handsome young son.

ALEXANDER: All Paris knows you too.

MARIE: Naturally, but the question is what do they know us for?

ALEXANDER: In my case the answers easy, I am a son. There is no mystery to that.

MARIE: So you think I'm mysterious?

ALEXANDER: Absloutely.

MARIE: I have not been absloute before, it must be quite dizzying.

ALEXANDER: I saw you the other week, in your carriage.

MARIE: This city thrives on gossip, sometimes I wonder if that's all it lives on.

ALEXANDER: Your'e right, Parisians have nothing better to do than gossip, it makes for revolution.

MARIE: Speaking of gossip, what did you think when you saw my carrige; did they point me out to you as a famous hoizantal.

ALEXANDER: No, you looked beautiful but very pale and ill; it's your condition.

MARIE: How delicatly you put it; I'm not with child.

ALEXANDER: Conmsumption then.

MARIE: La vie de boheme; actually I caught it when I was Twelve in a Normandy slum.

ALEXANDER: You should take better care of youself.

MARIE: What, are you seeking to become my protector, I have one already.

ALEXANDER: I know, the Baron!

MARIE: Yes the baron, he's very rich. Are you very rich M. Alexander Dumas?

ALEXANDER: No

MARIE: Then what is it you want?

ALEXANDER: I don't know.

The lights shift to illuminate DUMAS and Prudence.

DUMAS: And you my pretty, what do you say about my manners?

PRUDENCE: I agree with all Paris, your manners are perfect in every way.

DUMAS: Exactly what manners are we talking about?

PRUDENCE: A gentleman of your experience always knows how to please a lady.

DUMAS: You talk of pleasure, but we were discussing manners?

PRUDENCE: Come Sir, without manners there can be no pleasure.

DUMAS: Yes, to have no manners in the pursuit of pleasure is merely to be a boor; but in pleasure one must be direct, would you not agree.

PRUDENCE: You've come to the heart of the matter sir.

DUMAS: How much?

PRUDENCE: How much is life? How much is happiness, how much-too much I think.

DUMAS: A politick answer! I am not faithful; I'm notorious for my faithlessness, but it will be entertaining while it lasts.

PRUDENCE: Faith is not my strong point either, but fame, that is, that is worth much more than, than, most of us ever have in a hundred lifetimes.

DUMAS: Fame is a double edged burden my pretty.

PRUDENCE: When you have none it is no burden at all.

DUMAS: Where do you live?

PRUDENCE: Here with Marie! When I'm alone, she looks after me.

DUMAS: I had not thought Mille Du Plessis so ingenuous.

PRUDENCE: I do not know that word, I have no education, sowing does not fit a girl for much.

DUMAS: It means she's kind.

PRUDENCE: She's that alright.

DUMAS: You sound bitter.

PRUDENCE: Perhaps, but lets not talk of her, she seems absorbed by your son.

DUMAS: He's a good boy, if not yet a man of the world.

DUMAS looks across at ALEXANDER and MARIE they are still drinking champagne.

DUMAS: Well he's a chip of the old block, I'll give him that.

From the other room the strains of a new music can be heard.

DUMAS: A Polka, by god, I do so love a Polka.

DUMAS takes her in his arms and they begin to Polka towards the other room.

MARIE is coughing slightly and ALEXANDER gives her his handkerchief.

ALEXANDER: May I call on you?

MARIE: You M. Alexander?

ALEXANDER: Yes!

MARIE: Are you sure?

ALEXANDER: Don't play with me.

MARIE: *(as if seeing his seriousness fro the first time)* Come sir, should the son of so distinguished an author, be consorting with a lady such as myself. Have you no regard for your reputation?

ALEXANDER: What reputation do I have, save that purchased

by proximity to my father? I have no reputation but what I create for myself, so I ask you again, may I call on you?

MARIE: Surely you've read M. de Balzac's Splendour and Misery, that would put any sensible young man off.

ALEXANDER: Of course, and Manon Lesquat too, somewhat overrated in my opinion, both! But we can discuss literature, if you like! Though that is not why I wish to see you. This is my last offer, I'll never ask again, may I call on you.

MARIE: So forward! And so innocent. Well why not! So many men call on me, or at least they seem to think they have the right, I don't see why you shouldn't join them!

ALEXANDER: I may not be so easy to shake off.

MARIE: Ha, my lovers are rarely young M. Dumas: rarely as young or as literary or as ardent as you! What makes you think that I can't shake you off as easily as I shake off the dust from my boots?

ALEXANDER: Because I'm my father's son and tonight for the first time in my life I have begun to glimpse how to understand him, so no Mille Marie Du Plessis I can't be laughed away so easily, not now.

MARIE Picks up a flower from the bowl on the table, she breathes its scent and then starts to cough.

MARIE: I should not smell flowers, they are bad for me, but I so love the scent, it makes me think of happier times. Now I must leave you, I have guests.

For a moment MARIE touches Alexander's face. She turns away and enters the other room as she opens the door we can hear laughter and the Polka still playing. ALEXANDER picks up the handkerchief that MARIE has left on the table, there are flecks of blood on it. He is about to throw it on the fire, but changes his mind and puts it in his pocket.

ALEXANDER: And Icaras flew on, basking in the glory of the morning sun, while all the while its blistering heat melted the wax that held his wings, at last to free his soul in the depth of the wintry sea.

Blackout: End of scene 2

Act One: Scene Three
A few weeks later.

Turner's painting Fighting Termeraire is on display at a fashionable Art Gallery in Paris. There is a sofa facing downstage across from the picture, while upstage is a small table with a stick, a tall hat and gloves on it. MORNY is standing looking at the painting, when in comes DUMAS and PRUDENCE, who is now very much the Maitresse en Titre.

DUMAS: MORNY old friend, where have you been? Paris is a desert without you.

MORNY: Abroad, hither and thither, journeying is good for the soul as well as the pocketbook.

DUMAS: As they say it's often better to journey hopefully than to arrive. PRUDENCE, my love, meet M. de Morny, the most mysterious man in France.

PRUDENCE: What mystery could that be, I've not heard of you!

DUMAS: That you little minx is the essence of a mystery.

MORNY: M. DUMAS flatters me overmuch, I'm really a man of no importance.

PRUDENCE: Now that I don't believe, Ally here would never know anybody of absolutely, positively no importance.

DUMAS: What news of your brother?

MORNY: Still studying at the University of Ham.

PRUDENCE: Ham, I've never heard of a French university of that name, is it German?

DUMAS: No my dear it's not. Imprisonment in any fortress is depressing. My new book has a man imprisoned in the Chateau d'If for 14 years.

MORNY: 14 years, does he escape?

DUMAS: Of course, there'd be no story if he didn't.

PRUDENCE pulls DUMAS to the painting.

PRUDENCE: What a perfectly horrid picture.

DUMAS: How right you are my dear.

MORNY: I can't agree with you, M. Turner paints the sun

like nobody else.

PRUDENCE: Then he's welcome to it.

MORNY: What the sun?

PRUDENCE: That too if he wants. Besides why are we seeing a painting about an English ship, by an English painter; it's unpatriotic.

DUMAS: PRUDENCE here loves to drape herself in the tricolour.

MORNY: Drape!

PRUDENCE: I'm a model; that's how I know about art: only occasionally mind; it gets too cold in winter, and standing around all day stark naked except for a flag is a bit stiff. 'Liberty Leading the People', that's my favourite painting; don't you think I look like liberty?

DUMAS: But of course you do.

MORNY: Yes Mademoiselle, you could indeed pass for liberty.

The BARON and MARIE enter; DUMAS greets him effusively.

DUMAS: Baron, so good to see you and you too my dear.

PRUDENCE: *(Aside)* Damn her why is she here?

BARON: DUMAS, MORNY, good morning for riding, what!

MORNY: Yes, that too I suppose.

DUMAS: Any morning's a good morning for riding.

MORNY tips his hat to MARIE.

MORNY: You look well today, Madame.

MARIE: Thank you M. Le Compte, I have not been too good of late.

MORNY: I have missed the sight of you carriage.

MARIE: Perhaps I shall ride again, soon.

PRUDENCE: Darling, you shouldn't go out if you're so ill.

MARIE: I'm better, at least today.

PRUDENCE: Well, as I was saying this is a perfectly horrid painting.

BARON: I quite agree Mademoiselle. The English have no taste in art.

MORNY: You'll forgive me if I am not in accord, Turner has soul, which is the essence of great painting. I would buy this myself, if I could.

DUMAS: Bravo, as to art, I can't say, but the English have great writers, too many of course, but great.

MARIE: Soul yes, the light is alive with spirit.

PRUDENCE: What writers do you refer to?

DUMAS: Scott, Shakespeare, this new man Dickens.

BARON: Everyone talks of Shakespeare, in my opinion he's excessively praised. He just can't compare with Racine, or Cornielle, as to Dickens, I've never heard of him.

DUMAS: The finest novelist alive, excepting myself of course, and Hugo, if only *he* weren't so long winded.

PRUDENCE: But you said that about M. Balzac only yesterday.

DUMAS: Balzac, well he's good, naturally, but Scott is better.

MARIE: M. Scott is Scottish.

MORNY: A cold if elegant country.

PRUDENCE: I still can't stand this painting.

The baron puts his glass to his eye as if to examine it closer.

BARON: Irredeemably vulgar, this riot of colour; it won't catch on.

MARIE: *(Quietly, taking DUMAS aside)* You must tell Alexander to be more discrete.

DUMAS: Marie my dear, I can tell him till I'm blue in the face, but he won't listen. I told you he was a chip of the old block.

MARIE: Please, he can't keep appearing at places I'm at, especially when I'm in company. So far, it's only luck

that has prevented his name being bandied round the gutter gossips.

PRUDENCE: MARIE what are you two nattering about, come and help me. M. de MORNY and the Baron are about to come to blows.

BARON: Ridiculous, I only said jail was the proper place for somebody who tries to overthrow the state.

MORNY: I did not disagree with you.

BARON: Then what are you arguing about.

DUMAS: But what if a man was wrongfully accused, imprisoned by fiat and malice.

BARON: That is hardly the case here.

DUMAS: But that's my point, we must have imagination to feel. Yes, feel what's it's like to be alone in a cell for 14 years; no companions but a cruel goaler, little food, nothing but bread and water, forgotten.

BARON: DUMAS, you excite yourself. The case bears no comparison. The Prince is not forgotten, nor is he chained in a dungeon. Instead he's housed, in comfortable lodgings at the King's expense.

MARIE: But without liberty, no better than a caged song bird.

BARON: I'm not a heartless man, but the State must protect itself.

MORNY: Quite, Baron, but politics is a game of snakes and ladders one bad roll of the dice and everything can change.

DUMAS: One good roll, however! Take my hero, his fortune is another man's misfortune.

MORNY: Isn't that....

Alexander enters, somewhat breathless.

ALEXANDER: My apologies, Papa, Prudence, Baron, Mademoiselle.

DUMAS: Alex, you little rascal, pray let me introduce you, this is M. De Morny.

PRUDENCE: The most mysterious man in Paris.

MORNY: What an honour!

BARON: It's as I was saying, the man can't complain of injustice, or of cruelty. He's a state prisoner for political crimes it's as simple as that. We're more civilized than before, these are enlightened times. Kings of France have dealt with their political opponents more harshly than this, you must agree with that.

ALEXANDER: The Man in the Iron Mask for one.

BARON: The case is not the same. The Prince is a political criminal, convicted in open court; this was no letter de cachet, but a proper trial.

MORNY: My brother is not un-cognizant of the King's honour, but he believes that the people will not suffer him to remain in prison one day longer than he must.

BARON: Ah, the people, and just what do the people care?

ALEXANDER: Perhaps nothing, perhaps everything, perhaps enough to right a great injustice.

An attendant enters and gives the BARON a note.

BARON: Damn: politics, politics, they wait for no man. MARIE, we must go, the chamber is about to divide, I have to vote.

MARIE: I feel a little faint.

BARON: Perhaps you should stay; DUMAS look after her if you will!

DUMAS: Naturally.

The Baron kisses MARIE's hand.

BARON: Forgive me I must leave.

MARIE: Of course.

BARON: Be careful young man, such opinions might be misunderstood.

DUMAS: Nonsense, most of us think the Prince is hard done by. But well, he did attempt revolution, and against my

old patron too; so a comfortable jail is doubtless the best place for him, better than my poor Edmund Dantes.

The BARON nods sagely and then hurries out as PRUDENCE helps MARIE onto a sofa.

PRUDENCE: Darling, I keep telling you to take care of yourself.

MARIE: I'll survive, it's just that I haven't been out. I feel a little faint that's all.

ALEXANDER: MARIE, PRU is right, you mustn't tire yourself.

PRUDENCE: You shouldn't have come today.

ALEXANDER: Where would life be without danger?

MORNY: There is danger and there is danger! So you're the famous son of Alexander Dumas. All Paris speaks of you.

ALEXANDER: Fame is rather tedious, especially if one is famous because of somebody else.

MORNY: That's true enough. *(He reaches into his pocket and takes out a card)* My Card, please feel free to call upon me. But remember the Baron is right; my brother's cause is dangerous. Your father's politics are well known, besides the King was his patron, which makes him invulnerable in a way, but neither you nor I have such fortune. Forgive me; I too have business to attend.

MORNY puts on his hat and gloves.

DUMAS: What off? Do you have a carriage? I thought not, well share mine. I'm sure PRUDENCE here won't mind sharing with the most mysterious man in Paris, beside I haven't finished telling you the plot of my new book.

PRUDENCE: Ally, must you weary us all with that interminable book, no wonder your wife won't have you in the house. Anyway, why can't you be a Baron?

DUMAS: I'm a Davy de la Pailletiere, I don't need to be a paltry Baron, Besides my father was a General of the Republic. He gave up his title; he chose to be a Dumas; so I'm one too.

They exit together leaving ALEXANDER and MARIE alone.

ALEXANDER: I thought they'd never leave.

MARIE: PRUDENCE is right you should not have come.

ALEXANDER: I couldn't bear to keep away, besides I had no idea you were going to be at this exhibition.

MARIE: When I said you could call on me, I didn't mean that you should pursue me like a hunter with a Scottish stag.

ALEXANDER: What do you know about hunting, stag's or Scotland for that matter?

MARIE: Oh ALEX, don't be such a prig, I've been to England, I've even been shooting in Scotland. I've done lots of things you don't know about.

ALEXANDER: With men.

MARIE: Of course with men, how else do I live?

ALEXANDER: You can't deny you're happy to see me.

MARIE: No, I can't deny that.

ALEXANDER: Fancy the Baron not knowing Dickens.

MARIE: The Baron knows precisely what he wants to know, no more no less. That's the prerogative of the aristocracy.

ALEXANDER: My father's quite right; the aristocracy isn't worth much. Two revolutions and they still don't understand. Forget nothing; learn nothing. That's them all over; ignorant and stupid. That's why he won't petition the king to have his title restored. He'd rather reign in his world, a monarch of literature, than be a petty Marquis in theirs.

ALEXANDER looks at the card in his hand.

ALEXANDER: August de Morny.

MARIE: Be careful of him ALEX.

ALEXANDER: Why, is he dangerous?

MARIE: Yes, because he is a good man, a loyal man, and because of that he's truly dangerous.

ALEXANDER: The most mysterious man in Paris, or is that just my father joshing?

MARIE: MORNY has unusual relations, Prince Bonaparte is his brother.

ALEXANDER: Brother?

MARIE: Half-brother, he's the Queen of Holland's bastard.

ALEXANDER: That explains the conversation.

MARIE: So you see why it's dangerous to talk about Bonaparte, even in jest.

ALEXANDER: Perhaps, but what are we talking about MORNY for? *(He sits on the sofa)* You're much more important.

MARIE: Of course I am.

ALEXANDER: Every hour away from you is like an age. I never experienced this before. When I saw you that first day I felt as though I was walking on air, and ever day since it grows stronger and stronger until it consumes my whole body.

MARIE: Please don't.

ALEXANDER: I can no more stop this than I can stop breathing. Whatever else, you're my life now; there is no part of my existence that you don't touch. When I wake and when I sleep, when I eat, when I dream Marie Du Plessis is always there.

MARIE: Even if it's true, you can't waste such, such hope on a girl like me.

ALEXANDER: Waste, it's not waste to be able to feel what I feel now. It's to hold a moment eternally in your heart and know that living matters because there is someone else in the world. Why you? I don't know! I only know; it is. I love you. I have, ever since that first second. You know it's true, sitting here right now, my heart feels as though it's going to burst.

MARIE: I know.

ALEXANDER puts his hand on hers.

ALEXANDER: You love me too.

MARIE: I'm not strong enough to fight any more.

ALEXANDER: Nor am I.

She leans toward ALEXANDER and they kiss.

Blackout, End of Scene 3

Act One: Scene Four
Later that same night.

MARIE Duplesiss's apartment in Paris; it's still night, the darkest hour, just before dawn. The heavy red curtains are drawn back and moonlight streams through the open windows. MARIE enters from her bedroom, she is wearing nothing but a diaphanous white nightgown, her hair loose around her shoulders; she stands by the windows to look out into the night.

ALEXANDER enters wearing a heavy dressing gown; he has a shawl over his arm and a lamp in his hand. He sets the lamp down on a table.

ALEXANDER: Darling wear this, you'll catch cold, and...

MARIE turns back to kiss him.

MARIE: I'm too happy to feel cold, ever again. If there is splendour and misery in the courtesan's life, then this is splendid, loving you makes it wonderful.

ALEXANDER: If indeed there is, then, you aren't the Torpedo, and I'm not Lucian Rebempre, unsung, poet genius or M. Vautrin arch criminal genius, come to think of it I'm not a genius at all. My father, he's a genius; works eighteen hours a day, party's for the rest, it's amazing. I wonder how poor PRUDENCE keeps up with him.

MARIE: PRUDENCE is ambitious.

ALEXANDER: Ambitious for what.

MARIE laughs and folds herself over him.

MARIE: To be a bigger whore than me, though God knows why?

ALEXANDER: Please darling, don't talk like that. I don't like to think of your other life.

MARIE: Other life?

ALEXANDER: Before me.

MARIE: My other life was yesterday.

ALEXANDER: And today?

MARIE: It's still night, fantastic and extraordinary things happen at night.

ALEXANDER: What kind of things?

MARIE: Desire, fabulous, effulgent, glorious desire.

They kiss.

ALEXANDER: Effulgent, what an odd word!

MARIE: I read it in Gulliver's Travels; it means...

ALEXANDER: I know what it means, oh radiant one.

MARIE: Now you're laughing at me, because I'm not educated.

ALEXANDER: I'd never do that.

MARIE: Hold me Alex, sometimes I get afraid that nothing will last, that everything will be snatched away from me in an instant. I'm only twenty, but sometimes I feel I've lived a 100 years in the last seven.

ALEXANDER: Darling, don't be afraid, it'll pass, it's only a moment.

MARIE: How strange a moment is? Life is only a collection of moments, and when they're gone, what becomes of us?

ALEXANDER: Don't talk like that; we have now, isn't that enough?

MARIE: The world can change in an instant. Everything is one thing before, then after everything is different and nothing can ever be the same again.

ALEXANDER: It was like that the first night I met you.

MARIE: Was I very cruel?

ALEXANDER: Yes, cruel and heartless.

MARIE: Like the Torpedo?

ALEXANDER: (*Kissing her*) I'm not sure M. Balzac had us in mind, anyway I couldn't bear the thought of not seeing you. Sleep was impossible; I had to walk alone all night.

MARIE: All night?

ALEXANDERE: Yes all night, I walked to the village of Montmartre; there always a cabaret or café open even in the middle of the night.

MARIE: Oh my poor little Alex, all alone (*She kisses him again*) did you love me then too?

ALEXANDER: I knew it even before that night, from the first second I laid eyes on you in your carriage.

MARIE: Now that is silly, you didn't know me.

ALEXANDER: I didn't have to, I just saw and I knew that you were my life and that I couldn't ever be the same again because you existed. My whole life was changed in an instant.

MARIE: How romantic, like De Grioux in Manon.

ALEXANDER: I keep telling you it's a bad book, but the Abeé Prévost was right. I understand now how it's possible to love so quickly and with such desire.

MARIE: How did he know, do you think he fell in love with one of his parishioners and then had to write it down?

ALEXANDER: No, it was probably the boredom of all those provincial confessions, the same sins week after week; he had to do something to spice up his life.

MARIE: I not sure about that, some of the things the girls used to say in the factory about our local priest were hair raising.

ALEXANDER: What things?

MARIE: He was a randy old sod. You'd be surprised how often one of those guys in a black skirt tries to get his hand up one of ours. Mind you it was a bit more difficult for him; he only had a weekly confession to try it on, M. Reynard used to do it every bloody day.

ALEXANDER: Reynard?

MARIE: He and his wife owned the dress shop where I worked. He was always trying to pinch my bum.

ALEXANDER: He doesn't seem to have done any permanent damage.

MARIE: Not for want of trying.

ALEXANDER: Well, you've a pretty bottom.

MARIE: It's too big.

ALEXANDER: It's just perfect.

MARIE: (*Giggling*) It's perfect for what you just did.

MARIE jumps up and goes to the table where there is an open bottle of champagne. She pours some into two glasses and hands one to ALEXANDER.

MARIE: I hope the booze isn't flat, (*She sips a little from the glass*) no it's quite good. That what comes of being able to keep a decent cellar, champagne that doesn't go flat in five minutes!

ALEXANDER: I wouldn't know; I never kept any kind of cellar.

MARIE: A gentleman should.

ALEXANDER: I'm only a gentleman by proxy; because my father's one. I've never done anything except go to school and try to write.

MARIE: I never went to school.

ALEXANDER: When did you learn to read then?

MARIE: In bed.

ALEXANDER: Bed! Were you ill?

MARIE: Oh no, my boy friend taught me.

ALEXANDER: In bed?

MARIE: I pestered him unmercifully, so in the end he gave in and did it. I wanted so much to know you see. When I was a little girl I never cared about reading, nobody I knew could read. My mother died young and my father took to drink, not that it mattered, he couldn't read either, but after I came to Paris I decided I had to be educated, so for that I needed to learn to read. It took a week; I never left the house once, Manon Lesquat was the first book I ever read; it was wonderful.

ALEXANDER: But why, it's just a poor story of a tawdry tart who thinks of nothing but jewels and money.

MARIE: I know, but it was beautifully written and I read it all alone without help.

ALEXANDER: Somehow I never thought of people wanting to learn to read, one just did.

MARIE: Men and women hunger for different things, I wanted to read because it would make me free, free from ignorance, free from clever looks and smart remarks I wasn't meant to understand. I'm not tough like Pru; those things always hurt.

ALEXANDER: Yes, I see that now.

MARIE: You were luckier than me, what with your school and a doting father.

ALEXANDER: I never saw my father as a boy, and in the school, well it could be hard being the bastard of a famous man.

MARIE: Oh, my love, my poor wounded darling, we've both suffered much from those we love.

ALEXANDER: Is love so important?

MARIE: I believe that, don't you? Whatever else Manon loved De Grioux and he her, otherwise he wouldn't have gone all the way to America to rescue her from prison. She couldn't be all bad if she loved him so much.

ALEXANDER: Perhaps Manon did love de Grioux, but she left him just the same, for somebody richer.

MARIE: She had to live after all and De Grioux was poor. He stole so that they could be together: would you do that for me?

ALEXANDER: Maybe, but he committed murder and I wouldn't do that. Besides, I don't have to. My father gives me money, he's very generous.

MARIE: Generosity is always temporary and it comes with a price. Take my friend for instance. I loved him too, but, poor fellow it didn't last. His father the Duc said our liaison was scandalous and it was ruining the chance of his sister's marriage. He paid me a fortune to leave him and that was that.

ALEXANDER: I don't want to know about your...

MARIE: Don't be jealous, besides, haven't you had any girlfriend's before?

ALEXANDER: Well I...

MARIE: Darling, for a start you're not a virgin. Don't look so shocked, in case you hadn't noticed neither am I; well?

ALEXANDER: Why do you want to know?

MARIE: I want to know everything about you M. Alexander Dumas, my beautiful boy, well, were you ever in love?

ALEXANDER: I don't know, when I was sixteen I thought I was in love with one of mother's acquaintances, and then the following year I fancied myself attached to girl who served in a pastry shop in Lyon and two years ago I proposed marriage to the sister of my best friend, she, thank heaven, had the good sense to refuse me.

MARIE: There, I told you, lots of girlfriends, just like a sailor; girls in ever port. You're a wicked fellow Alexander Dumas; nobody ever asked to marry me, at least not yet.

ALEXANDER: Nobody?

MARIE: Nobody! I'm not sure I'm a marrying kind of girl. The old Duc had a point, women like me are not acceptable in good society, oh, we're tolerated, up to a point, but marriage!

MARIE pours another glass.

MARIE: Have some more champagne! I'm getting maudlin: I can't drink when I'm happy only when I sad. My father was like that, he drank everyday and then, well that was a long time ago.

ALEXANDER: Happy or sad, my father drinks like a fish too.

MARIE: He'll enjoy Prudence then. I've never seen a girl go at it in the manner she does. There's something ferocious about the way Pru attacks strong drink: I swear she could out-guzzle half a dozen men. I shouldn't have let her drink when she was young.

ALEXANDER: She's welcome to papa, though it won't last. To my knowledge he's never been faithful in his life.

MARIE: I never knew a man who was.

ALEXANDER: Will we last.

MARIE: That depends on you my handsome lover.

ALEXANDER: But I'm not rich.

MARIE: A minute ago you said money didn't matter because your father gives you an income.

ALEXANDER: It's more like cash when he's got it; he spends money like water.

MARIE: Money matters, but so does pleasure and art and good food and reading: I could be happy with a house full of books.

ALEXANDER: You'll love papa's house, books everywhere.

MARIE: Which one, I heard he built a castle.

ALEXANDER: He did, but I was thinking of St Germain: calls itself a chateau, but it's really a big farm house, it's by a lake in Picardy; in spring when the roses come, it's like heaven on earth.

MARIE: It's been a long time since I was in the country.

ALEXANDER: Come with me.

MARIE: When?

ALEXANDER: Now, this minute.

MARIE: What like this? We'd be arrested.

ALEXANDER: *(Laughing)* No, tomorrow or the next day.

MARIE: That would be impossible.

ALEXANDER: *(Harsh)* Why not?

MARIE: I can't just leave my life...*(Snaps her fingers)* like that, I've things to attend to, the Baron, Pru, my debts, everything; I can't jus run off and leave it all behind.

ALEXANDR: *(Shaking her roughly)* Stop it, stop it, I don't want to hear about the bloody Baron, or any other man for that matter, I only want you for me.

MARIE starts to cough violently, ALEXANDER stops shaking her and holds her tightly.

ALEXANDER: I'm sorry my darling, please forgive me, it's just that I can't bear the thought of you with anybody else, I was even jealous of PRUDENCE, she at least could see you when I could not.

MARIE: Please don't quarrel, please, I hate fighting so much, you've no idea how much I hate it, I have no strength for struggle. Poor Manon had none either and she died of it. Hold me Alex, sometimes I'm so afraid. I don't imagine that the world can keep me here for much longer.

ALEXANDER: Come with me to St Germain, the air is clean and beautiful, it will make you well again.

MARIE gets up and goes to the window, the dawn's early light streams through.

MARIE: Perhaps, look darling you can see the spires of Notre Dame, that's good luck.

ALEXANDER: *(Standing beside her)* It's a glorious new day.

MARIE: Then let's not waste it.

Blackout: End of Scene 4

Act One: Scene Two
February 1852.

MORNY is seated at his desk in a private office at the theatre. He is dressed in full evening rig with a white waistcoat and cravat. At the moment he's reading a file of papers. A SECRETARY enters.

SECRETARY: M. Le Minister, the baron is outside.

MORNY: The baron, what the devil does he want?

SECRETARY: I think he's afraid of being arrested.

MORNY: Well he wouldn't be the only one.

SECRETARY: Shall I send him in sir?

MORNY: *(Obviously bored.)* Yes, I suppose so. *(He looks at his watch.)*
If M. Dumas, either of them, make an entrance, show them straight in.

SECRETARY: *(Nodding his head.)* Excellency.

The SECRETARY opens the door to admit the Baron he's in a highly agitated state. Something is definitely wrong as the Baron is still wearing a wet over-coat and hat.

BARON: MORNY, help me.

The SECRETARY bows to MORNY then glances at the BARON, he shakes his head, as if at one of the condemned, and leaves shutting the door behind him.

MORNY: My, dear chap, of course, but first let me help you off with those things.

BARON: The police have arrested Duclos and Thiery...

MORNY: And Cavaignac and Montpellier and...

BARON: Them too?

MORNY: The list is not quite endless but neither is it inadequate, even if I say so myself.

BARON: I don't understand.

MORNY: The list is in my keeping, naturally! These are uncertain times!

BARON: Half the Chamber is under arrest.

MORNY: Only half, I must be somewhat remiss.

BARON: Hundreds shot in December, thousands now in exile.

MORNY: No one regrets, December 2nd more than I, but how comes you're so squeamish all of a sudden; I didn't notice you worrying too much about the people when Cavaignac gave the mob a whiff of grapeshot in June of 48.

BARON: Police agents surround me, everywhere I go men watch my every move!

MORNY: Ah, to be so popular, it must be quite fatiguing.

BARON: I get no peace MORNY everyday there are more of them.

MORNY: Now we get to the nub of the matter, you want me to tell you whether you're to be arrested?

BARON: I..

MORNY: Out with it BARON, do you want my help or not?

BARON: Damn-it MORNY, you're the Minister of the Interior, you can prevent my arrest with a single word.

MORNY: That my dear Baron is true, but why should I?

BARON: But...

MORNY: But what Baron? I told you in December that you were not even worth arrest, but still you waste your breath intriguing against us. I wouldn't mind but this latest escapade; I can hardly give it the dignity of calling it a conspiracy. You talked yourself onto the list - now you expect me to talk you off it.

BARON: I've always been loyal.

MORNY: To whom, my dear baron, to whom? Not to the king, as I recall you were delighted to see the back of him, not to the republic either, or you wouldn't have gleefully applauded Cavaignac as the savour of France even as he waded through the bloodied corpses of her people. My brother has never had a claim on you, but he's not such a fool ever to ask. You weren't even loyal to poor MARIE.

The doors open and Dumas enters, magnificently attired, he is surprised to see the Baron.

DUMAS: Baron, I'm surprised to see you, pleased of course, but surprised.

BARON: DUMAS you must help me I'm to be arrested.

MORNY: You exaggerate, prison is better than death, exile is better than prison.

BARON: Exile.

MORNY: The best I can do.

BARON: Exile.

MORNY: Must you repeat everything I say?

BARON: When?

MORNY: Now.

BARON: But..

MORNY: It behoves a man little if he's thrown a lifeline and then ignores it.

BARON: My affairs.

MORNY: France is a civilised nation, as did the ancients we give a man time to depart.

BARON: But where will I go?

MORNY: England.

BARON: (*Incredulous*) England.

MORNY: They say London is beautiful this time of year.

The Baron is about to argue, but decides better of it, he bows formally to MORNY and DUMAS then exits.

DUMAS: Politics is a dirty business.

MORNY: Very, but he'll be back. My brother will pardon him, as he will all the others. That is his problem, he's not ruthless enough, really.

DUMAS: Not ruthless, but the coup, then the shootings.

MORNY: The coup was my idea and the riots were an accident. We gave no order to shoot; in fact we gave strict instructions not to use violence. But once it had happened, we, none of us, least of all my brother, could go back.

DUMAS: I see.

MORNY: Do you my friend. I wonder.

DUMAS: Perhaps I don't see at all, but the Prince-President

MORNY: Wishes only peace. My brother is too sentimental, but I'm not. I'd hang the baron and all his ilk.

DUMAS: But why, he's no threat.

MORNY: That's precisely why he deserves a gallows. His kind think only of themselves, not of the king, the republic, or the people, certainly not my brother. They do not even care for the sacred soil of France; all they care about is what they can get. They'd rob the carcass of an ass if it would bring them one more sous. So yes

I'd hang them all, traitors every one. This was forced on us, you know it was. The chamber, the Baron's chamber, wanted to be rid of the Prince-President, but he was too strong, the people were with us, so like all thieves they tried a trick, well we saw through their little game, and the people will too.

Alexander enters; he's also wearing full evening rig.

MORNY: My dear boy. *(He embraces him)* Well are you ready?

ALEXANDER: Papa, Count. Yes I think so.

DUMAS: Think so. I remember my first play, I was a nervous as a kitten.

ALEXANDER: I didn't say I wasn't nervous, I just said I was ready.

DUMAS: Spoken like a veteran.

MORNY: Did I not say you should have faith?

ALEXANDER: I'm sorry I doubted you Excellency!

MORNY: Excellency? What is this, am I not still Morny?

ALEXANDER: No, you're a Minister of State.

MORNY: What a difference a day makes.

DUMAS: But was it necessary?

MORNY: Of course! Did they, did you, imagine we would give power up just like that?

DUMAS: All the same it might have been better if you hadn't.

MORNY: Better for whom, old friend? The people, the Republicans, the Monarchists; better for you perhaps? I know you do not love my brother

ALEXANDER: Monsieur.

MORNY: I apologise DUMAS that was uncalled for, these are uncertain times.

DUMAS: It's no secret I was, am, still a partisan of King Louis, but the July monarchy is gone, gone forever.

MORNY: True and you wonder how long we will last. I can't tell you, ask me in a year or ten, but I will say this at least we love France, the rabble who ruled before us never cared about anything but themselves.

The door opens and a heavily made up Prudence appears.

PRUDENCE: There you are ALLY, they told me I'd find you here. M. Le Compte. Alexander.

DUMAS: Ma petite belle, you should be backstage getting ready.

PRUDENCE: I'm not on for beginners. Besides I'm half in my costume already, M. Alexander only has me come on for the party scene in act two; that's typical of course I was always part of Rose's second acts.

ALEXANDER: I cast you as Marguerite's friend not her procureress.

PRUDENCE: *(Ignoring Alexander)* M. Le Compte it's you I believe we have to thank for our performance tonight.

MORNY: I had some small measure to do with it.

PRUDENCE: Small? The play is refused three times and three weeks after December the first, it gets authorisation from the Ministry of the Interior: best Christmas present I've had in years. I'd say there was nothing small about your influence. Ally was right all those years ago; you are the most mysterious man in Paris.

DUMAS: Did I say that?

PRUDENCE: Yes.

DUMAS: I said a lot of things.

MORNY: Strange that you should remember.

PRUDENCE: I remember a lot of things, but I suppose that can't be helped now.

MORNY: At least we have all met again here, because of Marie, to do her honour.

DUMAS: Yes, that's true.

PRUDENCE: Honour? Rose did not believe in honour. I loved

her, she was more to me than a sister ever could be. I wonder if any of you could say the same.

ALEXANDER: I.

PRUDENCE: You weren't even there at the end. I was. Only you M. Le Compte, only you came, that's why I forgive you this.

ALEXANDER: Forgive, forgive us, what right have you to Forgive? You stole everything Marie owned that you could get your hands on, before her corpse was even cold.

PRUDENCE: Of course, did you think I'd let her creditors have anything, anything that was hers?

DUMAS: Pru darling, let's not have a fight, it's Alex's big night.

PRUDENCE: And mine too I suppose! Anyway, come backstage with me the other girls are dying to meet you.

DUMAS: Morny?

MORNY: Yes you must, the perils of being a famous man.

PRUDENCE: I meant what I said, M. Le Compte, whatever else I'm grateful to you for having seen her at the end.

MORNY: So am I.

PRUDENCE: She died in agony Alexander, spiting blood like water. It wasn't a quick death like Marguerite, joyously finding god and her lover. Marie screamed so bad with pain I had to spoon laudanum down her throat every hour. You weren't there; don't talk to me about forgiveness, or right for that matter.

DUMAS takes her arm and they leave together.

ALEXANDER: Eight years, I'm amazed she's lasted so long with my father.

MORNY: She must have something. I'm sorry Alex, Prudence is distraught, the play doubtless brings back memories.

ALEXANDER: She's right of course, I wasn't there.

MORNY: Why should you have been? You were not together. As I recall your relationship ended badly, so why reproach yourself.

ALEXANDER: I did love her but, it was a hopeless love.
She was what she was, a beautiful, beautiful whore, and loving a woman like that, no good can come of it.

MORNY: You are too harsh! Marie was many things, even perhaps a whore, and that is doubtful in my own opinion, but she had the most gracious heart.

ALEXANDER: I'm not sure anymore, Marie is less real to me now than Marguerite Gautier. Isn't that strange, a creature of ink and paper more real than the flesh and blood I held in my arms. Sometimes it's hard to remember her as ever been alive, she seems to me now as a shadow in my dreams and that everything we were to each other was just some story, which happened to two other people, in a far distant place, long ago. Shakespeare is right the past is another country and things are different there.

MORNY: I think every man who met her was a little in love with Marie.

ALEXANDER: M. Le Minister, you never said.

MORNY: Marie, or perhaps I should better say Rose, was my friend, and that is strange, I've had so few friends, Marie, your father, you. All of us outsiders, belonging in no place, save that which we made for ourselves: she understood that about me the first day we met. Is it any wonder I cherished her friendship and love? There was little enough I could do for her, in those days, except to show that friendship when no one else would.

ALEXANDER: I'm sorry Excellency!

MORNY: No, there is no need. That's why I wanted this play to be a reality.

ALEXANDER: I tried to take her life and give it meaning, more than her own earthly existence had. Perhaps that's all any artist is, someone who takes peoples lives, however, drab and humdrum, and grants them meaning.

MORNY: Is that why you wrote La Dame?

ALEXANDER: Yes and no, I wanted to bring her back to me, as she was, when I first knew her, young, beautiful, holding life hard by the ears, despite, perhaps because of her sickness. But in the end it was never Marie I could find. As I wrote it was always someone else,

someone just outside my reach and gradually a new shape emerged, which grew into Marguerite Gautier.

MORNY: Perhaps in this we both failed her.

ALEXANDER: No, I hope she'd be proud of my play and me.

MORNY: I wonder what pride WE have a right to.

ALEXANDER: Come Excellency, not many men can lay claim to founding an empire.

MORNY: Empire?

ALEXANDER: Surely now it must come to that. A Bonaparte on the throne of France and not an Emperor, it's unthinkable!

MORNY: Your father won't like it.

ALEXANDER: My father's age is passing, a new more golden one is being born before our eyes.

MORNY: And MARIE.

ALEXANDER: The Marie's of this world too are gone, in their stead; poor Prudence, I wonder if she really knows.

The door opens and the secretary enters.

SECRETARY: Excellency, the Prince-President has arrived. And the Countess de Teba is also here.

MORNY: The Spaniard, damn, mark my words she will be a problem!

ALEXANDER: I don't understand?

MORNY: Another trollop with too much beauty: the fate of nations hangs on such small things.

ALEXANDER: The curtain will go up soon.

MORNY: If the play has meaning! Who knows? Perhaps our true fates are already decided!

Blackout: end of Act One.

Act Two: Scene One
Winter 1870

It's late afternoon in the ground floor sitting room of ALEXANDER Dumas' house at Saint-Germain-en-Laye. There is a set of closed and curtained French doors leading out into a garden and on the opposite wall another door that leads further into the house. DUMAS, now old and frail is dying, at present he is resting on a sofa, cum day bed, wrapped in a shawl, cap on his head, while Alexander, somewhat formally dressed in dark trousers, and white waistcoat, is reading to him from the Count of Monte Cristo. In the distance there is a rumbling sound that might be thunder.

ALEXANDER: Chapter 14. Escape From the Chateau D'If!

The rumbling grows louder, there is a sharp crack and we should realize that we are listening to cannon fire.

ALEXANDER: 75 mm, they must be pounding Paris again.

DUMAS: My poor city of light, to suffer so. It's too horrible to think about; the Faubourg's being shelled, bombs in the Champs Elyse, damn Germans, uncivilized beasts, damn the Emperor too; double damned, first for going to war and then for having the temerity to lose.

ALEXANDER: Papa don't distress yourself, remember what the doctor said.

DUMAS: Bloody doctors, I never listed to a quack once in my life.

ALEXANDER: Well you have to listen now.

DUMAS: Gurr, (He starts to splutter) damn, damn!

Alexander puts his arm under his back to help him up, at the same time he wraps the shawl tighter around him.

DUMAS: Damn illness, I never thought it would come to this.

ALEXANDER: None of us do, I think.

DUMAS: I'm not afraid of dying; it's just that life is so beautiful. It's hard to leave the world, especially at a time like this.

ALEXANDER: Away with your talk of dying, the doctor..

DUMAS: Doctors, doctors know nothing, If I'd a franc for every time a quack said..

DUMAS starts to cough violently.

ALEXANDER: (*Frightened*) Papa!

DUMAS: I'm near the end I can feel it in my bones. Last night I dreamt of my father He stood right there, (*points at the centre of the room*) large as life, wearing his uniform, he called me by my right name, Davy de la Pailletiere, it's a sign.

ALEXANDER: I'm not sure what it's a sign of, dementia probably.

DUMAS: I always said you were cheeky; what have I done to deserve such abuse in my old age?

ALEXANDER: Made yourself bankrupt for one.

DUMAS: What happened to all the money eh? Squandered, on wine, women and your education.

ALEXANDER: Money well spent then, at least I am able to look after us now. That expensive education you're boasting about enabled me to buy Saint-Germain-en-Laye back from your creditors.

DUMAS: It was always my favourite house.

ALEXANDER: Mine too.

The rumble of the guns is louder.

DUMAS: MORNY would never have let this happen, that's what comes of having a tart as Empress; a reactionary Spanish tart at that.

ALEXANDER: Father, the Empress may be a lot of things but she isn't a tart. Spanish certainly, reactionary perhaps; but as to the other, we both know enough about tarts to last several lifetimes.

DUMAS: Tarts! Tarts! Did I waste my life on women? No, a man can never have too many women.

ALEXANDER: We weren't talking about you're adventures we were discussing the Empress.

DUMAS: Eugenie, she might be beautiful, but she was a mistake. MORNY said that too. I have it burned in my mind, that day at St. Cloud in 1853, 'a man does not marry a lady such as Mille Montijo, bed her, yes, but marriage!' That from someone whose political skill I

trusted without reservation, even when I disagreed with him, which was often.

The guns rattle again.

ALEXANDER: The Duc would not have been caught out like this, not by something as stupid as Sedan.

DUMAS: Losing a battle is bad enough but to get your-self captured; no wonder the Empire collapsed.

ALEXANDER: I don't think the Emperor planned it that way.

DUMAS: MORNLY wouldn't have let it happen, I can't believe he's been dead these five years.

ALEXANDER: Truth is, the writing was on the wall the second they laid him in his grave. Paris was never the same after he was gone, that's why I bought this house. I thought I'd live in the country to get away from everything. That's an illusion of course everywhere you go ghosts haunt you: here has too many memories, good and bad.

DUMAS: Enough of this maudlin reminiscing, there's more important things, what happen in Chapter 14?

ALEXANDER: If I read it all in one go we'll have nothing left.

DUMAS: I wrote a lot of books, it'll take us years to get through them.

Dumas tries to rise, but the effort fatigues him.

ALEXANDER: Papa you're the most exasperating man in the world, no wonder you couldn't stay with any woman. Sit still and drink this.

ALEXANDER pours a little wine into a glass and DUMAS sips it slowly.

DUMAS: I never taught you that to appreciate wine.

ALEXANDER: MARIE did; that and so much else.

DUMAS: Poor MARIE, you still think of her.

ALEXANDER: How could I not, especially in this house?

DUMAS: Good god do you tell Nadia that?

ALEXANDER: No, and don't you tell her either, she thinks you're an old reprobate as it stands.

DUMAS: I am.

ALEXANDER: That's why you're in this half of the house and my wife is in the other; you only meet at mealtimes, it's a sensible arrangement.

DUMAS: A crafty arrangement, but you're a clever boy, a chip of the old block, I always said so.

ALEXANDER: Boy, I'm nigh on fifty.