

# **A Scent of a Hot-Air Balloon**

**Alberto Lombardo**

**Adapted by Alex Bollinger**

## **Characters**

**Madame** – A woman of indeterminate age

**Alphonse** – Her servant of indeterminate age

## **Author's note**

This play can also be performed by two men or two women. Because of the game, the characters can overcome differences in sex, social class, career, and identity.

It's all a game, but it's all true.

**Author bio**

An alumnus of theater acting at the Conservatory of Dramatic Arts in Lyon and the Antoine Vitez Workshops at the National Theater of Chaillot in Paris, Alberto Lombardo currently acts with several companies as well as his own productions.

He has written fifteen plays, regularly produced in France and overseas (Canada, Morocco, Germany, and Italy). Some of his plays have been edited by Art et Comédie and L'Harmattan; others have been radio-broadcast on France-Inter and France Culture.

Working with video producer Isabelle Delamare, he has created plays that mixed video and theater (real interviews with everyday people interposed a fictional story-line).

He also leads workshops that mix theatre, writing, and yoga.

Alberto Lombardo's theater translates the language of the heart, the body, and the mind with humor, putting his characters' self-reflection on stage. His plays are about relationships, family, identity, desire, sex, and spirituality.

His play *Un parfum de montgolfière* (*A Scent of a Hot-Air Balloon*), translated into Italian and English, is regularly produced. Productions are scheduled in 2012 for Barcelona and Montreal's Fringe Festival.

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(MADAME, an elegant woman of indeterminate age, enters. She's wearing a wet overcoat. She waits. A man's voice is heard off-stage.)

ALPHONSE (grumbling.)

I don't believe it! Is this mud? With those big boots! Don't they still teach people to wipe their feet before coming inside? (He appears. He sees his employer and seems surprised.) Oh! Well, um... You're back already?

MADAME (Ready to take out her claws.)

Startled? Unprepared? Discombobulated? Am I disturbing you?

ALPHONSE

Well I didn't-

MADAME

-think I'd be back so early?

ALPHONSE

What I meant was-

MADAME

Am I disturbing you?

ALPHONSE

Not at all!

MADAME

Perhaps you were expecting someone else?

ALPHONSE

Who could I possibly be expecting?

MADAME

Answer the question!

ALPHONSE

No, Madame!

MADAME

What insolence.

ALPHONSE

I wasn't expecting anyone.

So what's this I hear about boots?

MADAME

Boots?

ALPHONSE

You were talking about boots!

MADAME

Boots.... Boots? (Suddenly remembers) Oh, yes, the boots!!! (Tries to explain.) A mere figure of speech. I had cleaned everything meticulously... So when I saw the mud all over the floor-

ALPHONSE

It's raining!

MADAME

It really got my goat.

ALPHONSE

I see. And right away you thought about the goatkeeper. You told yourself: "Oh look! The goatkeeper came to the house to mess around again."

MADAME

Well, yes!

ALPHONSE

But the problem with your story is that there is neither a goatkeeper nor a goat in this town.

(Silence.)

ALPHONSE (Uneasy.)

Maybe I was thinking about the potential goatkeeper. One never knows what will happen with that sort!

MADAME

Or you knew it was me all along!

ALPHONSE

Madame was not expected to return before tomorrow night.

MADAME (Imperiously.)

You knew it was me!

ALPHONSE (Capitulates.)

I recognized your scent in the entry.

MADAME (Sarcastically.)

Oh! I'm so touched! (On the offensive again.) But I can't get all this talk of boots out of my head.

ALPHONSE

It was an expression, as I told you; I was disconcerted.

MADAME

And you shouted it loud enough to make sure I heard it?

ALPHONSE

But I had cleaned everything so meticulously...

MADAME

Do you think I'm deaf?

ALPHONSE

I don't mean to annoy you-

MADAME

I certainly hope not...

ALPHONSE

-but it took me all morning.

MADAME

Something tells me it wasn't me you were hoping to find.

(Silence.)

ALPHONSE

So? You're home a day early? What an expected surprise! Marvelous. Did something go wrong on your trip?

MADAME

It's this letter.

ALPHONSE

Ah!

MADAME

An anonymous letter I received over there...

ALPHONSE

Oh my!

MADAME

...that described your life style... (Shouting.) Really, I don't care what you do with your body, and you can do it with whomever you please – goatkeepers, if that interests you. And I certainly don't want any names! But when I'm told that this lifestyle manifests itself in my house, you can understand that I'm rightly concerned.

ALPHONSE (Indignant.)

Who could have possibly written such drivel? I would like to face my accuser, as is my right!

MADAME

So you deny it?

ALPHONSE

You can't seriously believe these lies?

MADAME

Why shouldn't I? After all, you're simply a servant; I have no reason to trust you.

ALPHONSE (Vexed.)

I understand. Except that I have been at your service for twelve months, and I have given you no reason to complain.

MADAME

I wouldn't know. You're always so discreet...

ALPHONSE

That's my job.

MADAME

But you never make a mistake?

ALPHONSE

That's what I'm paid for.

MADAME

You never get an itch to falter?

ALPHONSE

If I did, Madame, I would scratch it.

(Silence.)

MADAME

Take my coat, I'm about to suffocate. (ALPHONSE helps her out of her overcoat.) In any case, I would like for you to tell me exactly what you've been doing these past six days.

ALPHONSE

Seven, Madame! Seven!

MADAME

Pardon?

ALPHONSE

Madame was gone for seven days.

MADAME

Ah ! You counted?

ALPHONSE

When Madame is not here, work is easier. I have more idle time to think about other things.

MADAME

And you thought about me? You thought about my adventures on the other side of the Alps?

ALPHONSE

Frankly, I was more worried about the first meal I would have to serve Madame. I didn't know until the last minute if she would arrive for breakfast or dinner. I appreciate how delicate Madame is and how she prefers to eat only the freshest food.

MADAME

So when you got my message, you relaxed.

ALPHONSE

I can't hide anything from Madame.

MADAME

What's more, you noticed that I would arrive after dinner, so a trip to the market wasn't needed. You know that after eight your mistress can only have her chamomile. Well, you can sleep soundly, as I haven't changed any of my habits, Herbert!

ALPHONSE

Alphonse, Madame.

MADAME

Alphonse, of course! Herbert was your predecessor. But who cares? It's the same position.

ALPHONSE (Offended.)

Alphonse, Madame. If Madame is not satisfied with my work she should not hesitate to replace me.

MADAME

Oh, you're too sensitive. It's not my fault you weren't named Herbert.

ALPHONSE

No, Madame, it's my mother's.

(Short silence.)

MADAME

Well, I believe you were getting me my chamomile. And without sugar! But you already knew that because you have served me for twelve months.

(ALPHONSE exits. MADAME changes seats, perhaps to surprise her domestic.  
ALPHONSE returns with the chamomile.)

ALPHONSE

Your chamomile, Madame! Does Madame have any further need for me?

MADAME

I simply can't let you go to bed in this state, Herbert! (Laughs.) Did you hear that? It's stronger than I am. You probably think I'm doing it on purpose.

ALPHONSE

Not at all...

MADAME

I know you will hold it against me. It would bother me too much to know I'm keeping you *up* to night.

ALPHONSE

Rest assured, I always sleep placidly.

MADAME

Well aren't we lucky! (Short silence.) Tell me, Alphonse, have you ever taken the train?

ALPHONSE

Yes, Madame. I have even taken a plane.

MADAME

I asked you about the train. Calm down, my dear, this isn't a test. Let's relax and have a friendly conversation.

ALPHONSE

I believe it would be wiser if I retired.

MADAME

Why? What are you afraid of?

ALPHONSE (Uneasy.)

It's late... and... as Madame arrived earlier than expected... I have to rise early tomorrow... to go to the market, prepare lunch... I must be well-rested to provide quality service for Madame.

MADAME

I'm sorry to cause you so much turmoil.

ALPHONSE

Oh! It's nothing! It's a mere question of organization.

MADAME

Aren't you used to working under more strenuous conditions?

ALPHONSE

Yes, but I generally save my energy for more productive endeavors.

MADAME

Why? Do you think I'm too old?

ALPHONSE (Uneasy.)

Oh! Madame... Never would I... I would hate it if...

MADAME

There, there. Please don't excuse yourself. Desire is not ours to control. (She demonstrates.) Tell me, what vegetable do you dislike the most?

ALPHONSE (Without thinking.)

Cooked carrots.

MADAME

Imagine being forced to eat them every meal for a week.

ALPHONSE

That would be awful! I would be completely unable to bear it.

MADAME

Well, I, for example, hate pasta with basil. One could recite poetry about it all night; I would be completely unable even to taste the tip of a single noodle. (Pause) As you can see, we're the same.

ALPHONSE

Fascinating!

MADAME

So, do certain parts of my anatomy disgust you?

ALPHONSE (Uneasy.)

I... No!... Madame's anatomy is all in the right place.

MADAME

My intuition tells me that you dislike my make-up.

ALPHONSE

I would never-

MADAME

You think I wear too much.

ALPHONSE

Not at all! It's always exactly the correct quantity.

MADAME

And my nose? What thoughts does it inspire?

ALPHONSE

It has character. And it's important to be noticed.

MADAME

Don't try to flatter me. I already know that it's the only thing about me that one can see.

ALPHONSE

Madame is in a bad mood tonight.

MADAME

And my teeth aren't white enough.

ALPHONSE

You're kidding! They're brilliant.

MADAME

My breath is putrid.

ALPHONSE

It has a unique flavor.

MADAME

Flavor?

ALPHONSE (Uneasy.)

Scent... I meant to say scent.

A scent?  
MADAME

Striking.  
ALPHONSE

Like garlic?  
MADAME

Oh! Heavens, no!  
ALPHONSE (Shocked.)

I don't know. Be more explicit!  
MADAME

Striking... as you could be struck by an image, a sound, a scent that reminds you of your childhood.  
ALPHONSE (Panicking.)

A happy moment in your childhood?  
MADAME (Interested.)

A formative moment.  
ALPHONSE

Formative?  
MADAME

Life-changing.  
ALPHONSE

Interesting. Can you tell me more?  
MADAME

Oh! It's embarrassing.  
ALPHONSE

Why? Is it dirty?  
MADAME

Not at all!  
ALPHONSE (Offended.)

You can tell me anything, you know. I have an open mind.  
MADAME

ALPHONSE

I know.

MADAME

Ah! You noticed? I like that. Please tell me everything.

ALPHONSE

I doubt you would be interested.

MADAME

Everything you emit interests me.

ALPHONSE

If you're being honest, that would touch me deeply.

MADAME

I'm at the edge of your lips.

ALPHONSE

It was a Sunday. I was living with my mother, my brothers, and my sisters in a small town in Loire.

MADAME (Suddenly playful.)

Ah! The Loire! I'm very familiar with that area. The country is so green! I don't remember why I was there, but I can still see a charming hotel in a pretty little hamlet where I spent the night... Grapac! That was the town's name.

ALPHONSE

Oh no! Grapac is in Upper-Loire.

MADAME (Annoyed.)

I'm not a cartographer!

ALPHONSE (Feverishly.)

But they're right next to each other! I'm sure that you know Loire as well as you know Upper-Loire -

MADAME (Livid.)

Just who do you think you are? You're looking to get rid of me. I see right through your game! First you tried to humiliate me by implying that I would wear boots, now you're trying to make me think I'm insane, and soon you'll call the police... and you'll be the master of this house!

ALPHONSE (Stunned.)

But... Madame...

MADAME

You used all your extra leisure time to conspire against me while I was gone. And I know who your accomplice is.

ALPHONSE

I assure you that Madame is mistaken.

MADAME

You want to take everything from me: my youth, my life, my hopes, my successes... as well as my failures! The entire existence of the woman who truly lived! And it's with that goatkeeper you've planned to live.

ALPHONSE

I swear that I've never-

MADAME

And you are going to turn my beautiful country cottage into a goat farm!

ALPHONSE

That's absurd!

MADAME

I know The Loire very well!

ALPHONSE

I don't doubt it.

MADAME

Oh! If only I had proof!

ALPHONSE

You don't need any.

MADAME

You'll never let this die!

ALPHONSE

I assure you I believe you.

MADAME

Maybe you're right: I'd be better off in an asylum.

ALPHONSE (On his last nerve.)

Tell me this is a nightmare!

MADAME

But why? Why all this malice, all this fury? Haven't I been good to you this past year?

ALPHONSE

Yes!

MADAME

Don't I let you watch television sometimes in the living room?

ALPHONSE

Oh yes!

MADAME

Do you know many others who would let their servants do that?

ALPHONSE

No!

MADAME

Then what do you want? I don't understand; everything was going so well.

ALPHONSE (Begging.)

Madame, I never doubted your knowledge for a minute, I beg you to believe me!

(MADAME is suddenly quiet, almost amused.)

MADAME

Alphonse, get yourself together. I was only kidding. Look, you're shaking! I thought I'd put on a scene and see if you took advantage of the situation.

ALPHONSE (Disconcerted.)

Well, now you know.

MADAME

Go on, Alphonse. We were in the Loire, it was Sunday...

ALPHONSE

Must I?

MADAME (Sweetly.)

Alphonse...

ALPHONSE

It was cold, so it was winter. Of course, it's not necessarily proof because sometimes it's cold in summer.

MADAME

But it's not the same.

ALPHONSE

Anyway, I didn't have any reason to go out.

MADAME

But you couldn't help yourself.

ALPHONSE (Reliving the moment.)

A few minutes later, I find myself in the forest behind the town. It's a big, deep forest, very somber. I penetrate the dark woods. I can't see anything. I'm just walking in any direction. I jump at every sound I hear: the cuckoo of a cuckoo, the hoot of an owl, and the death song of a wolf. Suddenly I can't go any farther. I stop. I fall. I sleep. I dream. No! I think I'm dreaming, but it's real. At first it was her fragrance that roused me. The smell of jasmine. Oh! Jasmine! What an exquisite and enveloping odor! Then it was her voice. A sweet voice, a smooth voice, a voice that came from far away. She said, "But you're just a boy, look at how you're shaking! Don't be afraid, it's only me." And then her body appeared before me.... It was like a hot-air balloon. White skin! Curves! Thighs! A belly! Two... (He stops suddenly, embarrassed.) I don't know why I'm telling you this, it's far too personal.

MADAME

Oh, no! Don't stop, I was beginning to see it.

ALPHONSE

Two big, soft, fresh udders... like Cynthia's! (Explaining.) That was my favorite cow. I couldn't move. It was as if I was hypnotized. Right away she understood that she had to take the reins. She slowly took off all my clothes. She was tall! She was fat!... A dream, I tell you. She stood up. It was too dark to see her face. But I confess it wasn't her face that I cared about. With her two chubby, thick arms, she picks me up off the ground. She is still standing and I'm in her arms. My mouth brushes against her breasts... What should I do? She continues, sure of herself, and licks my body. Her mouth is like a manhole, a jasmine-scented manhole. I feel my manhood growing monstrously. (MADAME lets out a deep sigh.) Without warning, she drops me to the ground. It's so good it doesn't hurt. She lies down on top of me. Her entire body is on top of mine. She directs me. (Explaining.) Since I'm from the country, my mother never talked about these sorts of things. One hears about instinct, but, really, it's not obvious. But with her, what a lesson! I heard her sigh with pleasure. And I felt so good I couldn't believe I was where I was. Happiness is always like that: we can't believe we are where we are. Perhaps that's because we aren't used to it. But as I cried out, then, that's when I knew where I was. I screamed with pleasure. And she screamed as well. And the wolves howled together, in concert. I think we touched infinity. (Silence.) But the moment we feared arrived. It was almost daybreak. She had to leave me. She made me understand that what we experienced there, together, was love; it couldn't be mistaken. And that I could rejoice in it: "Everything you'll experience from now on will never be as strong as what you had here with me." She told me that in case I ever wanted it again. "Even between us, it will never be this powerful again. So don't try to find me." And she disappeared.

(Silence.)

MADAME (Charmed.)

And then?

ALPHONSE

Then?

MADAME

Did you ever see her again?

ALPHONSE

I didn't even look for her.

MADAME

You gave up! Did you believe her? (Pressuring.) But who is she? Surely she gave you her address. You should have looked for her. You're not telling me everything.

ALPHONSE

Are you daft?

MADAME

Don't take that tone with me! I'm not someone you just found at a bar. And your story doesn't hold water. There are still a few details that don't quite make sense. For example, you told me that you couldn't make out her face because it was too dark, but how did you know that her skin was white?

ALPHONSE

Really, her skin was so white that she shined like a full moon.

MADAME (Mocking.)

Then, if we follow your logic, she had a white body and a... purple head! And jasmine? The smell of jasmine! Are you sure that it was jasmine and not honeysuckle?

ALPHONSE

Don't forget that I'm from the country: when it comes to vegetation, my nose cannot be beat.

MADAME

Of course! (Sarcastically.) Because jasmine, in the Loire, gushes forth from the countryside. But between us, this manhole, this hot-air balloon... was it a monster?

ALPHONSE

I was a boy, she was a woman.... At the time, everything seemed bigger.

MADAME

And this must be simply terrifying now that you're older! (Her voice gets higher.) Do you think that I believe you? That you call this love? How shameful! It's pure pornography! Love, love... But, my poor imbecile, if that's all love is, then anyone could say that he knows it! You have only discovered the joy of a penis that finds itself useful for the first time. It's nothing more. (Once again interested.) But winter? On Sunday? Are you sure?

ALPHONSE

On that one, my memory is unshakable.

MADAME

Then put my mind at ease; you had other encounters afterwards?

ALPHONSE

Why would I? That sort of experience would not suffer a comparison.

MADAME

Without a doubt, this is what's made you so bitter.

ALPHONSE

Do I seem bitter?

(Short time.)

MADAME

It's funny, I can't get my head around the idea that you've remained faithful to that obese hen for all these years.

ALPHONSE

It only takes willpower. Let's say that I've climbed that mountain.

MADAME

It's more like you're still on the ground! It's a pity to have already known that so early. It leaves nothing for the future.

ALPHONSE

Better early than never. And life can be captivating in many other ways when one has already been mastered by it.

MADAME

And you made yourself a servant?

ALPHONSE

You don't know the half of it.

MADAME

Then go get me another verbena!

ALPHONSE

Chamomile, Madame.

MADAME

Oh, yes. It was a test to see if you really are from the country.

(ALPHONSE forces a smile, then exits. MADAME, alone, reflects, perhaps on her next attack? ALPHONSE returns with a new cup of chamomile.)

ALPHONSE

Madame's chamomile! May I allow myself to ask Madame permission to retire to my room?

(Short time.)

MADAME

Madame says no. Does her domestic object?

ALPHONSE

He exists but to respect every wish his mistress expresses during his service. Also, he can't think of a retort.

MADAME

Very well. (She looks at ALPHONSE intensely.) I will never cease to be amazed by the way you behave around me.

ALPHONSE

I don't understand, Madame.

MADAME

What's your plan? In spite of everything you say, you're a funny fellow. You have a secret.

ALPHONSE

I don't have any left. You just took my last one.

MADAME (Lewdly.)

Then... what are you searching for?

ALPHONSE (Imitating.)

But... nothing! Haven't I been a part of your life for a long time already? Is there any other man on Earth who has had the privilege of being near you for as long as I have?

MADAME (On the attack.)

I've been gone for seven days and you haven't even bothered to ask me how my travels were.

ALPHONSE

I didn't want to be nosy.

MADAME

A domestic, when his mistress has returned from a long absence, should wonder if her voyage went well. That's simply protocol.

ALPHONSE

Please excuse my thoughtlessness.

MADAME

But you can redeem yourself.

ALPHONSE

I ask for nothing more.

MADAME

I'm listening.

(Short time.)

ALPHONSE

What should I do?

MADAME

Oh, it's hopeless...

ALPHONSE

What's the matter with Madame?

MADAME

Alphonse, before I scream, be kind and ask me how my trip was.

ALPHONSE

How was your trip, Madame?

MADAME

Terrible, my dear!

ALPHONSE

Oh!

MADAME (Mocking, more irritated.)

Oh!!! Is that all you can muster in response?

ALPHONSE (Melodramatic.)

What's the matter with Madame? What is this nebulous veil that has draped itself over Madame's face and made her lose all her mirth?

MADAME (Same game.)

Hell has come for me, Alphonse, and you cannot imagine the horror I barely escaped.

ALPHONSE

Someone wanted to hurt Madame? (MADAME acquiesces and moans.) My God! Why? How? Tell me!

MADAME

There were two of them.

ALPHONSE

Two men over there?

MADAME

Punks of the worst kind... unshaved!

ALPHONSE

How horrible! Where?

MADAME

In my compartment.

ALPHONSE

In the train? You should have screamed!

MADAME

They didn't let me.

ALPHONSE

They muzzled you?

MADAME

Oh!

ALPHONSE

Handcuffed you?

MADAME

Oh!!

ALPHONSE

Tied you up?

Oh!!!  
MADAME  
What happened?  
ALPHONSE  
I can't think about it without a paralyzing fear returning.  
MADAME  
That's terrible!  
ALPHONSE  
It's too hard!  
MADAME  
How could they have done it? A woman like you!  
ALPHONSE  
Can you imagine?  
MADAME  
I'd prefer not to.  
ALPHONSE  
Fortunately, the conductor came.  
MADAME

ALPHONSE (Triumphantly.)  
And you were saved!... He scared them away with his ticket pad, and the scary monsters... (He doesn't know what to say.) They were... thrown out the window.

MADAME (Insulted.)  
You're making fun of me!

ALPHONSE (Confused.)  
I'm sorry, but I allowed myself to be overtaken by the game.

MADAME (Horrified.)  
By the game?... What game?... Do you think that I pay you to be a clown? I'll have you know that if that's what I wanted, you're certainly the last person I would have called.

ALPHONSE (Hurt.)  
I admit that I'm not naturally very playful but-

MADAME

I confess that in the beginning, when I saw you cross the threshold into my house, my attention was piqued... Yes, I even surprised myself by imagining... But my hope did not last long. I quickly noticed my mistake... However, I knew quite a few people in your function who provided both an unquestionable professionalism as well as a charming intimacy.

ALPHONSE

Good for you!

MADAME

Granted, there weren't that many. But all the same... (Suddenly nostalgic.) It was different with Harold. We were partners in crime. He supported me, he encouraged me... when he knew that I wouldn't dare...

ALPHONSE

That you wouldn't dare... what?

MADAME

I don't know... Put on a hat that I thought was too ostentatious... close the door on beggars... eat chocolate... He made my day-to-day life easier. He gave me peace. He guessed my doubts. You could even say he experienced them himself. He confessed it to me one day. I was deeply moved.

ALPHONSE

Well, of course you were.

MADAME

You agree, don't you? When I was bed-ridden – because at the time I often had terrible migraines – he didn't leave my room.

ALPHONSE

I've always been fascinated by the sort of servant who doesn't hesitate to sacrifice himself for his master.

MADAME

Aren't you one of them?

ALPHONSE

No one has ever complained about me.

MADAME

Perhaps you always happen upon masters who aren't very demanding... (Returning to her story.) Then there was Maurice. But Maurice, well, he was another story.

ALPHONSE

Of course, it's Maurice's story.

MADAME

Yes... (She realizes ALPHONSE is making fun of her.) Oh, shut up! Not a second goes by that I don't compare you with him. He was tall, he was strong, he was... He was a man!

ALPHONSE

One would think so, with a name like that.

MADAME

How many times did I say, "Maurice, within you lies the seed of a real man. Use it!"

ALPHONSE

But not too much! It's a big responsibility to have a large family.

MADAME

You are disgusting, vulgar, without any sensitivity or poetry. Learn to stay in your own place, my servant, because you must do infinitely better to hope to climb to the top one day.

ALPHONSE

I have no such ambitions, Madame.

MADAME

That's the dream of all who are inferior, sir.

ALPHONSE

Sir?

(A short time.)

MADAME

I'm sorry, I mistook you for someone else.

ALPHONSE

How many are there who have served Madame on this property?

MADAME

My God! Since when? I don't know anymore... Forty!

ALPHONSE

Damn! It must be troubling to know that you scared them away so easily... Because if we do the math, that would mean that each servant's average tenure was six months... Anyway, tell me, am I an exceptional case?

MADAME

You are so exceptional that I haven't even realized you exist.

ALPHONSE (Again energetic.)

I can, however, swear to Madame that it's me who does her laundry, who cleans her house, who also flushes the toilet after her, who turns off the television when she falls asleep, who vacuums the cookie crumbs left all over the carpet in her bedroom, who polishes her shoes, who dusts her knick-knacks, who doesn't hesitate to run all the way to the other end of town to find the only chocolates Madame allows herself to eat, who serves every meal starting with breakfast in bed with her mail... rather, the TV Guide... because aside from bills, personal letters addressed to Madame are rare.

MADAME

What are you insinuating? My friends keep up with the times... They use the telephone.

ALPHONSE

It's not every day that the phone rings. Far from it.

MADAME

We're a polite sort of people. And we don't enjoy small talk. We only bother each other in emergencies.

ALPHONSE

I'm so stupid! I should have thought of that.

MADAME

What are you driving at?

ALPHONSE

I'm simply observing.

MADAME

Well, don't stop now!

ALPHONSE

I wouldn't want to insult Madame.

MADAME

Don't worry. I don't place much importance on the words of those of lesser stature.

ALPHONSE

That's wise.

MADAME

Here, since the subject seems to inspire passion in you, why don't we go deeper? Tell me about me.

ALPHONSE  
Excuse me?

MADAME  
Yes, if one were to interrogate you about me, what would you say?

ALPHONSE  
In the presence or absence of Madame?

MADAME  
In my absence, obviously.

ALPHONSE  
Oh, yes! Because that changes everything.

MADAME  
I don't doubt it.

ALPHONSE  
I would respond that Madame is a solitary person.

MADAME  
You're kidding!

ALPHONSE  
She never receives guests.

MADAME  
Really?

ALPHONSE  
Really... Sir....

MADAME  
Sir?

ALPHONSE  
It's men who, in general, perform this type of interrogation.

MADAME  
Go on.

ALPHONSE  
Where were we again?

MADAME

We were talking about guests.

ALPHONSE

Certainly. Please excuse my carelessness, sir, but Madame's passing has me in a deep state of grief.

MADAME

Well, don't get carried away!

ALPHONSE

I can be more objective like this. So, as I was saying, in the twelve months I've served Madame, I have never seen her receive a single guest.

MADAME

Indeed. But you aren't with Madame twenty-four hours a day?

ALPHONSE

I had my day off like any other servant, but if I may be so bold, I'm certain Madame didn't receive anyone while I was away from the house.

MADAME

(She steps out of her role as detective and becomes herself again.)

You must have been spying on me!

ALPHONSE (Amused.)

Who's speaking? I'm afraid I'm lost. (Short time.) In any case, Madame's interjection should prove to the detective that I'm not mistaken. (Quizzical.) But if Madame would like to end the interrogation, I would be pleased to fulfill any of her wishes.

MADAME (As the detective.)

So you're sure?

ALPHONSE

Absolutely, sir.

MADAME

What proof do you have that you're telling the truth?

ALPHONSE

My good word.

MADAME

During this long year, your mistress must have gone out?

ALPHONSE

Yes. On Wednesdays she played bridge with her friend Clara. A childhood friend, according to Madame.

MADAME

And according to you?

ALPHONSE

I don't see why I would doubt Madame's words. If she had something to hide, all she would have to do is not talk about it.

MADAME

Continue, please.

ALPHONSE

On Saturday afternoons, Madame went shopping.

MADAME

With whom?

ALPHONSE

I swear, sir... with no one.

MADAME

You know a lot of things!

ALPHONSE

I'm observant, that's all.

MADAME

But she never left for a longer time?

ALPHONSE

Upon her mother's death, Madame went to the region of Var for the funeral. She was gone two days. And just recently, Madame went to Florence to visit a friend. Her trip lasted seven days.

MADAME

And what happened there?

ALPHONSE (Sarcastically.)

Well, you're the detective.

MADAME

Yes, but surely you have your own little opinion?

ALPHONSE

Madame seemed very nervous when she returned.

MADAME

Ah! Ah!

ALPHONSE

Yes. She attacked me.

MADAME

Oh! Interesting...

ALPHONSE

Perhaps. But either way, it was very disagreeable.

MADAME

Why did she attack you?

ALPHONSE

She certainly seemed to have missed an opportunity.

MADAME

What do you mean?

ALPHONSE

You know Italy, the mentality, the customs, the trains... the Italians... The Italians in the trains!... Madame is very French. We don't have the same concept of time. Over there, it's easy to connect with a stranger. Here, you have to have quite a few chamomiles before... (MADAME, distraught, cannot retort. ALPHONSE rejoices.) Do you have any other questions? I have to say that I'm starting to find this awfully stimulating.

MADAME (Composed.)

If you would like to, let's talk about before.

ALPHONSE

Before?

MADAME

Yes, before you started working for Madame.

ALPHONSE

You know, sir, it's difficult for me to talk about before for the simple reason that it was before. I wasn't there.

MADAME

Oh! But you must certainly be familiar with some fragments of your mistress's life! What about her marriage?

ALPHONSE (Sure.)

Madame was never married.

MADAME

That's not what I have in my papers.

ALPHONSE (Less sure.)

Madame was never married!

MADAME

That's not what I have in my papers.

ALPHONSE (Shouting.)

Madame was never married!

MADAME (Rejoiced.)

You're wrong, Alphonse!

ALPHONSE (Annoyed.)

Who are you, now?

MADAME

I'm me!

ALPHONSE

Me? Who's that?

MADAME (Sweetly.)

Myself! Your beloved mistress! (Short time.) So you didn't know? I'm surprised that someone like you, so clever, so intuitive, wasn't at all suspicious. Or maybe it's a subject that upsets you?

ALPHONSE

When did this happen?

MADAME

Now Alphonse is curious. You have to ask the good man. He's the detective. Remember that I'm dead.

ALPHONSE

This is getting grotesque!

MADAME

As you like. I already know the answer.

ALPHONSE

Very well!... Sir, could I know when Madame's wedding was?

MADAME

Because you seem attached to her, I can tell you. About five years before you arrived.

ALPHONSE

That's not possible.

MADAME

Pardon? (ALPHONSE seems hurt.) Get a grip, pal. It's not important. Nobody warned me that you were so sentimental!

ALPHONSE

Please excuse my negligence. I thought I knew everything about Madame.

MADAME

Everybody makes mistakes.

ALPHONSE

Everybody is not me! Who was it? And how did they meet?

MADAME

All I can tell you is that he was a very important banker. I doubt you would know his name. He died three years later.

ALPHONSE

Bequeathing all his estate to...

MADAME

Everyone said that they were very much in love with one another. But that's hearsay. To truly understand the affair, one would have to hear Madame's version. But because she's no longer with us, you're left with only one option: your intuition.

ALPHONSE

It's useless.

MADAME

You're right. Useless. (Silence.) But if I were to judge by your reaction, Madame lived alone from her birth up until her final night. That can't be true! A woman so elegant, so intelligent – dare I say it, such a woman! – could not have escaped love.

ALPHONSE

That sort of thing only exists in the real world.

MADAME

And we're not real? You're scaring me.

ALPHONSE

Have you taken a look at me? And have you taken a look at her? Do you really think that we are a part of this world? Do you think that someone like me still exists in this era? Do you think that a woman like her deserves to be only called... "woman"?

MADAME

What? Was she a man?

ALPHONSE (Annoyed.)

God! Can we stop playing this ridiculous game?

MADAME

Fine! Tell me... A small wave and your entire philosophy capsizes. You seemed so sure, so untouchable, perfectly composed... What's wrong, Alphonse? The idea of two people being in love, deciding to walk their paths together, what about that terrifies you so much? Maybe you're jealous... Are you jealous?... You're jealous! (ALPHONSE doesn't respond.) Look, I understand. After all you've endured, it's understandable that you'd be frustrated... Oh! Alphonse, you should have tried to find her again! You could have always been in her arms, with many little hot-air balloons around you.

ALPHONSE

Oh, that's funny!

MADAME

Don't pretend you're different; I'm on to you. Like most men, you are weak and a coward. In spite of your job, I will give you the benefit of the doubt: you're just a man. In any case, it would be prudent for me to think of you as one.

ALPHONSE

Men must have made you suffer enormously, Madame.

MADAME (Hurt.)

I won't allow you to talk to me that way.

ALPHONSE

Whenever something gets too close, you don't allow anything anymore. (Short time.) Tell me, between you and me, were you ever married?

MADAME

You'd have to look inside me to find out.

ALPHONSE

I'm sorry, my activity stopped at the moment when the woman of my life disappeared into the forest that night.

MADAME

What poetry! It makes me want to "di fare la pipi." That's what they say in Italy. It's the chamomile's fault. I've abused it. (She exits, then reappears dressed more comfortably, perhaps.) His name was Arthur. He was the director of the National Elitist Banque . NEB, if you will. He was a short man, without a beard, without a mustache, almost bald... A bald head is cute! More of a quiet man. A man you wouldn't notice the first time. Clara was the one who introduced me to him.

ALPHONSE

Bridge Clara?

MADAME

Exactly. He was also a card-game enthusiast.

ALPHONSE

And it was love at first sight!

MADAME

Not at all. That wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted to have a simple affair. They say that's where real love is born.

ALPHONSE

In general, the people who say that waste their lives away mortally bored.

MADAME

One day, when we were leaving my friend Clara's house, he offered to escort me home.

ALPHONSE (As Arthur.)

Would you allow me to escort you home?

MADAME

I don't see why not. We know each other well enough now.

ALPHONSE

Please... Your coat...

MADAME

Thank you.

ALPHONSE

Your hat...

It's not mine. MADAME

Even better! ALPHONSE

I beg your pardon? MADAME

You are already... so imposing! ALPHONSE

I hope that doesn't bother you. MADAME

If you don't walk all over me.... ALPHONSE

Hm hm hm! MADAME (Clucks.)

(ALPHONSE pretends to stumble.)

Watch your step!

I'm a little nervous. ALPHONSE

Is your car parked far away? MADAME

I walked. ALPHONSE

Ah? MADAME (Disturbed.)

Cars are hell in the city, don't you think? ALPHONSE

Then what are we going to do? MADAME

The metro or a hotel. ALPHONSE

MADAME

Pardon?

ALPHONSE

Listen, dear... May I call you by your first name?

MADAME

Certainly.

ALPHONSE

Let me cut to the chase. I'm at an age when bachelorhood starts to grow heavy and only makes a man angry. He loses confidence, puts on weight, gets acne again, and hates to find himself alone, each night, in front of the perpetual plate of overcooked pasta.

MADAME

Don't you ever go to a restaurant?

ALPHONSE

It's just an expression.

MADAME (Dazzled.)

Ah!

ALPHONSE

I won't lie to you about my love life; I have had plenty of experiences.

MADAME (Interested.)

I would imagine.

ALPHONSE

All those palpitating sexual encounters, violently passionate, with or without the next day ...

MADAME (Same game.)

More like without!

ALPHONSE

I see you know men.

MADAME

Women aren't so different, you know.

ALPHONSE

Right away I knew we were the same, you and me. That small devious spark in your eyes...

MADAME (Pretends to be intimidated.)

You're embarrassing me.

ALPHONSE

Tell me, tell me!

MADAME (Gives in willingly.)

Oh, the people we've known!

ALPHONSE

Waitresses, seamstresses...

MADAME

Playboys, firemen...

ALPHONSE

Meter maids, heiresses...

MADAME

Bell boys, policemen...

ALPHONSE

Businesswomen, housewives...

MADAME

Seamstresses...

ALPHONSE (Surprised.)

Wait, what?

MADAME (Innocently.)

I never buy off the rack.

ALPHONSE

Real femme fatales, fake doormats... But I won't bore you with the entire list.

MADAME

That wouldn't bother me.

ALPHONSE

From now on I aspire to live a peaceful life. To have at my side someone who's sweet, beautiful, quiet, and reasonable. Someone like you-

MADAME

Oh, that's just the mask I wear.

ALPHONSE

-would correspond perfectly to the new life I'd like to live. (MADAME laughs stupidly.) My financial situation is stable, even enviable.

MADAME

Pish posh!

ALPHONSE (Serious.)

One has to be pragmatic.

MADAME

If you say so.

ALPHONSE

When I mentioned a hotel, I assure you it was also only an expression.

MADAME

Ah?

ALPHONSE

Obviously, I'm not boorish enough to propose a night of screwing.

MADAME

At your age!

ALPHONSE

Anyway, too much sex makes sex boring.

MADAME

That depends.

ALPHONSE

A hotel, in my personal vernacular, means: "Would you like to combine our two lives into one until death do us part?"

MADAME (Breathless.)

Oh my God!

ALPHONSE

Am I being too forward?

MADAME

Ah, no! Really... Yes, maybe... Well, it's an idea!

ALPHONSE

It's up to you.

MADAME

Oh my! I'm horrified by the metro because I can't breathe. Let's get to the hotel!

ALPHONSE

Seriously?

MADAME

Of course! I know a very nice one not far from here. They rent rooms at half price if you show up in the afternoon.

ALPHONSE (Panicked.)

Perhaps I didn't make myself clear?

MADAME

Don't try to play that game anymore. I know that your desire to ride me in bed is burning you up. It's my virginal side that you've intimidated. You told yourself: "I can't scare her... With her, I've got to take my time... She certainly isn't the type who'd want me to get straight to the point." Well, looks can deceive! (Lyrically.) Let's try, Jean-Pierre, and our union will be electrifying!

ALPHONSE (As himself.)

Jean-Pierre? I thought his name was Arthur.

MADAME (Uneasy.)

Yes... Arthur.

(Long silence.)

ALPHONSE

It was worth a try. After this little scene, you're already twice as colorful as you were before. They say that the imagination sometimes supplants experience when one doesn't have the opportunity to live big. They also say that, in high doses, it starts to take the shape of reality.

MADAME (Hurt.)

That's what they say.

(A time.)

ALPHONSE (Sweetly.)

Are you angry with me?

MADAME

For what? My story isn't as extravagant as yours, but when I'm discovered, at least I'm honest enough to admit it.

ALPHONSE

Frankly, I never learned how to improvise.

MADAME

Who's talking about improvisation? Au contraire, you've obviously rehearsed a lot!

ALPHONSE

To what end?

MADAME

What would I know? To impress me! To protect yourself!

ALPHONSE

From what?

MADAME

From your admirers.

ALPHONSE

What admirers?

MADAME

I'm sure you've had plenty of success.

ALPHONSE

No more than anyone else has.

MADAME

Honestly, you're not bad.

ALPHONSE

You really think so?

MADAME

It's just my personal opinion. I wouldn't presume to represent the entire fairer sex...

ALPHONSE

Of course.

MADAME

...but I can confirm that you have something.

ALPHONSE

Something?

MADAME

OK, you're not very sensual, that's a fact!

ALPHONSE

Ah!

MADAME

Yes, you're too stiff. Your expressions are too jerky. You're missing a certain harmony. Anyway, it's not something one learns – it's innate.

ALPHONSE

So then I don't see what I could have.

MADAME

You have a deep look. Your eyebrows are a little too bushy... But you could always pluck! You are too hairy for my taste. If the number of hairs on your body was proportional to how many appear on your face, I would find you rather unattractive.

ALPHONSE

Stop! My chest is rather hairless.

MADAME

Really?

ALPHONSE

And my back as well.

MADAME

That's a surprise. And the rest of your body?

ALPHONSE

It would match your fears.

MADAME

It's already not so bad. What's important is that it's not the same all over.

ALPHONSE

So I have a chance?

MADAME

Yes! Now, it depends on your skill.

ALPHONSE

What do you mean?

MADAME

I mean it in the crudest sense.

ALPHONSE

Apparently, I'm very satisfying.

MADAME

Who told you?

ALPHONSE

You have a short memory.

MADAME

Ah! That story? I suppose you have had other criticisms?

ALPHONSE

I think I've been very clear.

MADAME

Alphonse! You're no fun! Now that you've exposed your body, there's nothing keeping you from giving it all to me. Take advantage of this situation, my dear! It's pleasant being together tonight, isn't it? The convergence of two people as different as you and me... It's a great lesson in tolerance.

ALPHONSE (Unconvinced.)

Yes, it's nice.

MADAME

I'll let you have a short, intimate moment with me. Don't refuse it. I am perfectly capable of stooping to your level, you know. When I was a student I knew quite a few common girls and boys. Let's overcome these barriers, let's cross these borders, let's explore one another! I'm convinced that I can help you. I feel that something's broken in you.

ALPHONSE

What makes you think that?

MADAME

You're always defensive. You're hiding a wound. I feel you were traumatized as a child.

ALPHONSE

Well, you feel wrong.

MADAME

Alphonse! If you're not going to cooperate, I might be tempted to get mad.

ALPHONSE

What do you want to know?

MADAME

Swear that you never again made love after that lustful night.

ALPHONSE

You're still thinking about that? You only think about sex. Why do you want to know?

MADAME

It's a philosophical question! And if you don't find the answer appropriate, make up whatever you'd like. I don't care.

ALPHONSE

It's perfectly appropriate to me. I'm charmed to learn that we have at least one shared interest... (Inspired.) You see, I learned and managed to completely reject the carnal impulses that alienate us all. I'm not saying that it was easy. I overcame challenges. I had to fight. Especially when there was a full moon. Fortunately, I was rather athletic. When you've risen above such primal urges, I told myself, you will see how advanced you are next to your contemporaries. When I see all these women and all these men ready to lose themselves, to suffer, to humiliate themselves, to hear themselves say a few unfortunate words about love, it depresses me.

People prefer to love each other warmly in the boiling water rather than be confronted by their solitude. I'm different. I've got nothing to prove. I don't give a damn what others think. Nothing is as important as my own integrity and the solidity of my identity. This eroto-sentimental masquerade gives us the illusion of filling our voids, our lives. And when you have accepted that, like I have, your mind can move on to more important subjects.

MADAME

It's easy to adhere to this sort of ideology when one has found the ideal partner, like you did.

ALPHONSE

I got lucky.

MADAME

So then why did you renounce it?

ALPHONSE

It's my extremism. And, I'll admit it, my fatalism as well. I achieved excellence. I feared I would waste away my life for nothing if I kept searching.

MADAME

The body has its needs. It's bad to refuse it. It's not good for your health. Be wary, time is passing. When you want to get back in the game, it will be too late.

ALPHONSE

Everything happens as if it were faraway from me.

MADAME

Even this, now, the act of speaking about it, doesn't that provoke a small reaction in you?

ALPHONSE

“That which touches me collapses, nothing touches me, everything washes off.” That’s my mantra.

MADAME (Aggravated.)

Wind and words! And with that, you’re fine! But life, my dear, is another story.

ALPHONSE

Whose life? Other people’s? Mine is adequate. And I intend to live it as I please.

MADAME

By being a servant?

ALPHONSE

Precisely.

MADAME

Excuse me while I laugh.

ALPHONSE

Please, go right ahead. I have time.

MADAME

Alphonse, you’re not serious?

ALPHONSE

I’m a happy man, Madame. I’m one of very few people who can boast living in a state of permanent well-being, far from the worry and anguish that make up other people’s lives. What joy, if you only knew what it’s like to be a servant!

MADAME (Ironically.)

Oh! Should I take notes?

ALPHONSE (Uninterrupted and with extreme pleasure.)

You plunge yourself into a deep intimacy without ever becoming entwined. You can do anything, so long as you’re not noticed. You are given a life to examine, a being you must nurture like a precious object that could break if you neglect it for a second. Everything depends on you. However, you are always there, so much so that your mistress is no longer conscious of your presence and acts with total abandon. You are a privileged witness. And nothing gets by you. You can brag about knowing more about her than you know about yourself. You attend to all her moods, at every peculiar heart beat, you are her emotional keeper. It’s up to you to remove the wet handkerchief after she cries. It’s you who makes the satisfied chuckles spring forth when you announce, unexpectedly, that there’s still one chocolate left in the back of the pantry. It’s also you who replaces the sheets, heavy from last night’s activities. You are the good life, you are the afterlife, and it’s as brilliant as an orgasm!

(Short time.)

MADAME

How many beauty marks do I have on my left buttock?

ALPHONSE

I beg your pardon?

MADAME

Don't tell me I let the world's biggest voyeur into my house! My God!... You've followed me into my bedroom, in my bed, under my sheets.

ALPHONSE

Are you joking?

MADAME

I suddenly feel so naked... And at night! When I thought that I was just having normal dreams about sex.... It was you! I know I saw you once, in the darkness, coming into my bedroom. (She yells.) Alphonse! (She explains.) But I didn't want to believe... I thought it was too crazy.

ALPHONSE

You're hallucinating, Madame...

MADAME

(She acts as if her dreams were real.)

Alphonse?... Is that you?... Alphonse?.... I order you to come before me... (A short time.)

Alphonse, I'm warning you, I'm counting to three and after that I'll scream. One... two...

ALPHONSE

Madame...

MADAME (Pretends to be offended)

Do you know what time it is?

ALPHONSE

Half past three.

MADAME

Do you appreciate the gravity of the situation?

ALPHONSE

Not really.

Someone could surprise us. MADAME

At this hour, it's not very likely. ALPHONSE

How do you explain your sudden intrusion? MADAME

With difficulty... ALPHONSE

Ah! At least no one could say that you tread lightly! You've had all this time to spy on me, to observe how I function to best make me accept the coming moment. Now, tonight, when I'm exhausted and my life is upside-down, you're making your attack. You're very clever! You're right here, in the middle of the night, when I sleep.... MADAME

But Madame isn't sleeping. ALPHONSE

Does that bother you? MADAME

I must admit it's late. ALPHONSE

And you have to get to bed. MADAME

Well... ALPHONSE

Go on, my dear, go on! Madame will let you, tonight. MADAME

That's very kind of her. ALPHONSE

(ALPHONSE tries to leave but MADAME holds on.)

Yes, you won. I should sacrifice myself. Unleash your desire for me that you've held back for so long. I'll give in, tonight. MADAME

ALPHONSE

I don't see what you're talking about, Madame.

MADAME

But I see the battle that is being waged among your senses. The suffering, the torture you've had to fight. You're here, three feet from my bed, your hands are moist, your mind is burning, your manhood is at attention... I'm sighing. You take that sigh as an invitation – and you aren't wrong! Under the sheets, you picture my body so naked, so frail, so malleable, so innocent. It's so hot... My nightdress is so short. Now you're going to take control and you like it. You are now as you've never been... My God! I don't recognize you.

ALPHONSE (Troubled.)

Perhaps it's not me?

MADAME

Yes, yes, it's you. Transformed, free, dazzling!

ALPHONSE

Oh yeah?

MADAME (Moved.)

Everything's happened so quickly... Oh! Alphonse! You're glowing!

ALPHONSE (Lets go.)

Yes, oh yes.

MADAME (Excited.)

It's surreal.

ALPHONSE (Looking to quiet her.)

Quiet down!

MADAME

You're not going to stain my sheets.

ALPHONSE

That would be a beautiful accident.

MADAME

You're a professional. (Short time.) Have you been thinking about this for a long time?

ALPHONSE

Since the day you fell down the stairs. Do you remember? It was a terrible fall. What strikes me now is that small scream you let out just before you realized that falling was inevitable. A small scream, strident, filled with ecstasy. All of a sudden, I saw the door to your room open for me, I

saw the bed, the sheets, the comforter... and then I saw the bed without the sheets and without the comforter.

MADAME

What a mess!

ALPHONSE

A night of love.

(A time.)

MADAME

And if I hadn't fallen?

ALPHONSE

Isn't it better this way?

MADAME

You're right, I'm looking for the pea under the mattress.

ALPHONSE

Madame is a perfectionist.

MADAME

Alphonse is a seducer.

ALPHONSE

I'm being honest.

MADAME

Flatterer!

ALPHONSE

Madame upsets me.

MADAME

Flatterer! Flatterer! Flatterer!

ALPHONSE

Madame is wrong.

MADAME

And what do you do after having crossed the threshold into my room? What reaction do you have while watching me lie down in my bed like a pretty little girl?

I put one foot in front of the other.

ALPHONSE

You're walking.

MADAME

It's very dark, I'm afraid of bumping into something.

ALPHONSE

Do you want me to turn on my little lamp?

MADAME

Ah no! Absolutely not! I think that would make this scene so much less intense.

ALPHONSE

If that's what you want...

MADAME

I'll stay on my path.

ALPHONSE

The rhythm of your breath is getting heavier and heavier.

MADAME

You could be sleeping.

ALPHONSE

If that helps...

MADAME

Yes, yes, that would! Perhaps, if you could keep your eyes closed as well...

ALPHONSE

No problem. (Short time.) You aren't very far anymore?

MADAME

Only a few inches left.

ALPHONSE

MADAME

(She lets out a small, surprised scream.)

Already? I haven't even had enough time to prepare.

ALPHONSE  
You're sleeping; you don't need to prepare.

MADAME  
You're right. I always forget. It's so hot...

ALPHONSE  
I see a little bit of shoulder.

MADAME  
That would be mine.

ALPHONSE  
I don't doubt it.

MADAME  
You're slowly lifting the sheet.

ALPHONSE  
Your nightdress is so short...

MADAME  
I already told you that.

ALPHONSE  
I'm quivering, looking at your body shaking.

MADAME  
My God!

ALPHONSE  
I feel like I'm growing wings.

MADAME  
Oh, yeah?

ALPHONSE  
Soon you're going to feel them.

MADAME  
Really?

ALPHONSE  
Let yourself go.

MADAME

I'm floating. (With extreme sweetness.) Are you floating too?

ALPHONSE (Charmed.)

This scent that dissipated so long ago.... This scent intoxicates me again... I don't know... Where are we?... If you could sleep... Is it starting again?... Who are you? You already told me that we could never see each other again. Am I dreaming? People can't achieve this kind of ecstasy twice in one life.

MADAME (With ecstasy.)

Liar!

ALPHONSE

My head is spinning. I'm lost.

MADAME (Suave.)

Come here!

ALPHONSE

I don't know where I am.

MADAME

It's happiness.

ALPHONSE (Moans.)

Oh!

MADAME (The same.)

Yeah!

ALPHONSE (Suddenly aware.)

No!... I'm sorry but we're going to have to stop what we're doing.

MADAME (Floating.)

What?

ALPHONSE (Very excited.)

I beg you to excuse my intervention.

MADAME (Floating.)

What's going on?

ALPHONSE

No, no! It's not me. Nothing happened.

MADAME (Floating.)

What are you saying?

ALPHONSE

It was a misunderstanding... The exhaustion, the heat, a few mistakes led us in the wrong direction.

MADAME (Sweetly.)

Don't try to look for an excuse. Alphonse, you don't have anything to fear because I forgive you. I know! It's almost daybreak, my dear, and you can confess all your sins.

ALPHONSE

What are you talking about?

MADAME (Playful.)

Do I have to remind you? It was you who had the audacity to take me with impunity, this whole year, five or six times a week, while I slept!

ALPHONSE

You're not being serious.

MADAME

Say it... Say it!... All I want is to hear you say it.

ALPHONSE

I'm tired. We'll finish tomorrow.

MADAME (Energetically.)

You finish practically every night without shame!... I know how difficult it is for you to face your desire with open eyes. (She mocks.) "If you could keep your eyes closed." It's so much easier. If I don't sleep, then you can't do it! It's all so clear to me now. (As if speaking to herself.) I bet you drugged me! (Like a revelation.) In my chamomile, perhaps!... Of course!... And every morning, when I wake up, I'm surprised to notice that my sheets are soaked. Sometimes I found myself, in pain, lying down on the rug... Ah! I bet you had fun! And you were violent towards me! To make me that groggy, I don't doubt it. The more I think about it, the more I can see it... I saw you, so determined, you were so crazy, but I couldn't resist at all. And the day after, I tried to convince myself that it couldn't have happened, that I hallucinated. So I watched you. And you seemed so calm...

ALPHONSE

You're really a terrible human being, Madame. Sorry, but I'm not Harold, nor Maurice, nor any of the others you fired when they stopped meeting your... expectations.

MADAME (Spirited again.)

What are you getting at?

ALPHONSE

The truth. All your life is a splash, Madame! And you flow with it. I refuse to be pulled into that.

MADAME

At least I breathe, I sweat, I feel, I live. You are introverted, frustrated, and who knows what else! You make me vomit, Alphonse! You're a servant – not just in my house, but in your head as well.

ALPHONSE

I take responsibility for my despair. I don't make a show of it. Everything washes off me. But I don't flow.

MADAME

I don't know how to swim.

ALPHONSE

All the more reason to stay on the banks.

(ALPHONSE exits.)

MADAME

What are you doing? It's not yet time for you to retire. I haven't given you permission.

ALPHONSE (Offstage.)

I'm not going to bed.

MADAME

I order you to reappear before me.

(ALPHONSE reappears, a suitcase in his hand and his coat on and buttoned during the following dialogue. She's agitated.)

Where are you going, Alphonse?

ALPHONSE

Home. My mother's house.

MADAME

You can't be serious.

ALPHONSE

I miss the jasmine.

MADAME

That can wait.

ALPHONSE

I have to go.

MADAME (Desperate.)

And me? You aren't asking me permission? You can't abandon me like this. You simply can't.

ALPHONSE

It won't be that hard to replace me.

MADAME (Deeply.)

There won't be anyone else like you.

(A time. ALPHONSE takes his suitcase. She grabs it.)

Alphonse, think it over. It's you who's making you suffer. It's you who keeps you from living. You can't deny what happened just now on these sheets!

ALPHONSE

These sheets? What sheets? I don't see any sheets. Madame must have been dreaming. I only see a sofa, a couple of chairs, a table, Madame's living room. Let's learn how to stay in our own places: You said it yourself and you said it loud enough. (Short time.) Goodbye, Madame!

MADAME

You're going to stay here! I order you!

ALPHONSE (Energetically.)

I advise you not to insist.

MADAME (Delirious, vanquished.)

Why? Do you hate me so much that you're willing to do the unthinkable? What are you trying to warn me about? Should I arm myself? Understand that if you aren't going to stay on in your role, I'm not going to know what to do with myself anymore. If you lose your path, I'll lose myself... I need my little beacon in the night! I've never suffered from another servant a quarter of the impudence I take from you. I'm getting dizzy. Stop looking at me like that while I'm addressing you, it's indecent. You have your own little plans in your head. You're expecting something from me, I know. But you won't have me. At least not like that! To think that I never lock my bedroom door! I could be accused of being too relaxed if something should happen. It would all be my fault. People would say that it wasn't the first time. People are so envious! I'm alone and defenseless, it would be easy for you to abuse the situation. Tell me, you've projected all your fantasies on to me this past year? It takes a special dose of willpower to be able to restrain one's sexuality for so long. (Pathetic.) Swear that you don't feel a thing when you're here so close to me. Swear that each morning, when you wake up, your first thought is not about me, and neither is your last thought right before sleeping at night... if you can sleep. Confess! You're burning to touch me and see what happens!

ALPHONSE

One doesn't always have to touch the fire to know that it burns.  
He starts for the door. She follows him and grabs onto him.

MADAME (In total despair.)

Don't leave me! I'll give you my name.

ALPHONSE

Please, Madame!

MADAME (Same game.)

With me, you'll get back your light, you'll go to that enchanted world deep in the forest. Accept that true love can only happen with open eyes.

ALPHONSE

I'd rather go it alone.

(ALPHONSE exits.)

MADAME

But Alphonse, it was me in the forest!

ALPHONSE (Offstage.)

You've lost a lot of weight, Madame.

CURTAIN