Scene One

(This first scene takes place in a cottage at Chaillot [3.43 miles west of Paris, France], in late summer or early fall, 1774. The Marquis de Lafayette, age 16 [September 6, 1757-May 20, 1834], his wife Marie-Adrienne-Francois de Noailles, age 14 [November 2, 1759-December 24, 1807], and his mother-in-law, Henriette-Anne-Louise Comtesse de Noailles, age 37 [February 12, 1737-July 22, 1794], all getting settled in. Comtesse is married to Jean-Louis-Paul-Francois de Noailles, the Duc d’Ayen, age 34 [October 26, 1739-October 20, 1824], who did not come. Lafayette will have his inoculation for smallpox this day. Lafayette is dressed in military garb, a captain in the French Army of the East. Adrienne and her mother are in eighteenth century dress, gowns billowing below. Door upstage back wall leading to a bedroom. Credenza at wall stage left on top of which are games, to include chess and whist, and a pile of clothes in need of folding. Window at wall, upstage right. Door downstage right. Game table with three chairs around it facing downstage, left center stage. High backed chair upstage against wall, left. Breakfast table stage right with three chairs facing downstage to right of game table, on which is bread, butter, and cheese. Congolais, or coconut macaroons, are also on the credenza, as is a cup and ball toy. It is mid-morning. Adrienne and Lafayette are playing tric-trac, facing each other, Lafayette to stage right, Adrienne to stage left. Comtesse is in the bedroom offstage.)

***Lafayette:*** (Rolls die, a four and a three; he closes a five and a four; looks away. Randomly drums his fingers on the table.)

***Adrienne:*** Gilbert. (Chastising.) You’re distracted. (Directly, but calmly.)

***Lafayette:*** No, I’m not.

***Adrienne:*** You roll four and three. You close five and four. You are distracted and tric-trak is no challenge when your opponent is distracted. (Proceeds to gather the die, the tric-trac board, and return them to the credenza on which is also a chess set and a card deck for whist; and a small plate with congolais, or coconut macaroons.) How about chess? Whist? A congolais? (She faces him. No response.) Something bothers you. What’s the matter?

***Lafayette:*** (Wrinkles forehead, eyes heavenward, thinking.) The inoculation, I suppose. (Puckering his lips, pronouncing each word distinctly, but insincerely.)

***Adrienne:*** I don’t believe you. That makes no sense. You told me yourself you were there with King Louis XVth, at Trianon Palace, when he got the smallpox. Sores draining on every square of his skin. And the smell…I remember you telling me about the smell. I know you. You thought this through and it’s the right thing for you to do.

***Lafayette:***  Could it be, perhaps, I worry about how this inoculation might affect you?

***Adrienne:*** Affect me? (Incredulous.)

***Lafayette:*** Yes. You.

***Adrienne:*** Mama had smallpox. I was at her side. She got over it. I’ve had no ill effect. Why should your inoculation affect me?

***Lafayette:*** Your priest, then. I worry about your priest.

***Adrienne:*** My priest? He’ll be thrilled. Since when?

***Lafayette:*** Yes, if you must know, it’s your priest.

***Adrienne:*** What does my priest have to do with it?

***Lafayette:*** (Rises, faces downstage, gazes upward as though rising to the occasion and making it up as he goes along.) Did he not say smallpox visits at God’s will?

***Adrienne:*** He did. But I think…(Lafayette cuts her off.)

***Lafayette:*** And…and didn’t he say inoculation is a sin? Didn’t he? (Turns to her, his story now with momentum.)

***Adrienne:*** (Calmly.) He said it.

***Lafayette:***  That it’s against God’s will? And the consequence, I forget…

***Adrienne:*** You’re making it up as you go along.

***Lafayette:*** I remember. The consequence for inoculation, eternity in Purgatory or two weeks in Marseilles. Tough choice.

***Adrienne:*** You’re impossible. Besides, you’re getting inoculated, not me.

***Lafayette:*** Guilt by association. You’ll be held accountable. You know how priests are. They force confessions out of you.

***Adrienne:*** It’s a good thing you’re already baptized Roman Catholic. You’d have a time of it if you had to qualify. You’re so sacrilegious.

***Lafayette:*** (Playfully now. Takes her hand, mockingly.) I couldn’t bear your being banished to Marseilles for two weeks. Purgatory not so much. You can escape Purgatory.

***Adrienne:*** You’re making fun of me.

***Lafayette:*** I’m not. I am making fun of priests, yes. To say God visits smallpox on a child? No God I know. (Pauses. Looks at Adrienne.) There is one thing I know to be true: I adore you. What do you say to that?

***Adrienne:*** It’s an evasion. You are restless…preoccupied. What is it?

***Lafayette:*** I do. I adore you. (Pause.) And I envy you.

***Adrienne:*** Envy? Whatever for?

***Lafayette:*** You’ve found your destiny. You know what you are about.

***Adrienne:*** My destiny is with you.

***Lafayette:*** Your faith. You found it. You’re secure in it. It’s how you look at the world.

***Adrienne:*** (Glances down. Thoughtful. Reflective. Takes a sip of the tea she just poured.) When you and I said our vows, it committed us. Taking sacrament is the same thing, or else it’s all show. It took me awhile to figure that out. I must have been a gloomy bride.

***Lafayette:*** (Sits down. Fumbles to get his sword situated.) You were intent and determined, but not gloomy. Disciplined is the right word.

***Adrienne:*** The Catechism wouldn’t hurt you, you know. And prayer.

***Lafayette:*** I remember my baptism.

***Adrienne:*** You do no such thing! You were two days old!

***Lafayette:*** (Ignoring her.) I remember thinking: this priest is trying to drown me. Those drops were like boulders, and I kept batting them away and he kept dropping them. I decided priests didn’t have my interests at heart. (Now seriously.) I’ll never measure up to your piety. It isn’t in me. (Stands. Walks to retrieve the tric-trac board. Stands facing her.) I admit. I am frustrated. I have accomplished nothing. You are the one bright spot in my life. (Walks back to the game table.)

***Adrienne:*** It’s not true. You’re a captain in the Army of France. You have a wife who loves you. (Playfully.) More than that, you have a mother-in-law who loves you. This is rare in France.

***Lafayette:*** This is rare anywhere. (Removes his coat. Serious again.) My family was with Joan of Arc. My father at the Battle of Minden.

***Adrienne:*** Where he died. Sliced in half by an English cannonball. I prefer you whole. (Pause.) France hasn’t had a war now in ten years. Is that the problem? You haven’t been shot at? Get me a pistol, if it’ll make you feel better. I’ll fire a round or two at you.

***Lafayette:*** No. (Puts on a more casual coat.) Perhaps. (Hesitant, thoughtful.) No, I don’t need to be shot at, but thank you for offering. (Pause.) Where is Mama?

***Adrienne:*** Unpacking. And thumbing through your books. She delights in those books. She’s happy to be at remove from Paris, even if it’s not that far and even if it’s only for a while.

***Lafayette:*** You and your Mama didn’t have to come. This inoculation business truly is a trifle.

***Adrienne:*** It takes courage.

***Lafayette:*** (Pacing, deliberately, aimlessly.) It’s really self-defense. Smallpox is more likely to get me than a bullet. It’ll be time to go soon.

***Adrienne:*** (Watches as he paces.) Even now. You hunt the Beast of the Gevaudan.

***Lafayette:*** (Stops. Looks at her quizzically.) That was a long time ago.

***Adrienne:*** Even so. You’re at it now.

***Lafayette:*** I have no idea what you’re talking about.

***Adrienne:*** Mama told me the story. People were afraid to go outside. Whatever it was killed women and children to say nothing of livestock.

***Lafayette:*** My Grandmother Catherine used to tell wonderful stories. They were always about family. She said there was no braver man than my father. When his regiment was under fire and his commander killed, he didn’t hesitate. He stepped right up to lead. That’s who I want to be. Anyway, when I heard that even the King’s own huntsmen failed to find that Beast of the Gevaudan, I went out to grapple with it. I still remember the thrill of it.

***Adrienne:*** And what was your plan. What were you going to do had you found it?

***Lafayette:*** (Acting out the part, with reserve.) Grab it by the ears. Wrestle it to the ground.

***Adrienne:*** What if it had you for lunch? An eight year old would have been tasty.

***Lafayette:*** You’re messing up a good story. As I was saying, I’d wrestle it to the ground, tie it up and haul it in. People would line up to cheer. It never occurred to me that it could take any other turn. Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is I wanted to do something worthy. Some good thing.

***Adrienne:*** (Takes tric-trac back to the credenza. Retrieves chess set.) Come. Sit. Let’s play chess. You’ll find your purpose. One day you’ll look up and you’ll be in the middle of it.

***Comtesse:*** (Calls from the bedroom, offstage and upstage.) Gilbert!

***Adrienne:*** In here, Mama. Gilbert is with me.

***Comtesse:*** (Enters. Sees Lafayette.) This book. It interests me. (Holds cover of book up to him.)

***Lafayette:*** It’s in Latin, you know. Do you read Latin?

***Comtesse:*** (Deadpan look at Adrienne. Rolls her eyes.) Of course not. That’s why I take what the priest says on faith. Here. (Shows him the inside cover.) Is this not in your own hand? “Verc-in-get-or-ix.” What is a “Verc-in-get-or-ix?” Adrienne, look? Is it something naughty?

***Lafayette:*** Latin class. College du Plessis.

***Adrienne:*** And what…what about this? (Still looking at the inside cover.) What is this: “Vis sat contra fatum.” You wrote it over and over.

***Comtesse:*** (Playfully.) “Verc-in-get-or-ix.” Very musical. A minuet perhaps. Come, Gilbert, dance with me. (Hands book to Adrienne, takes Lafayette by the hand; she steps in time, saying syllables cadenced.) “Verc-in-get-or-ix.” (Lafayette just stands, smiling.) “Verc-in-get-or-ix.” She stops. Looks at him.) Gilbert. You are a terrible dancer. Your footwork …

***Lafayette:*** What about my footwork.

***Comtesse:*** You have none.

***Lafayette:*** You are the second person to say so.

***Comtesse:*** (Returns to Adrienne’s side.) I am your mother-in-law. I am permitted to say mean things about you. It is my duty. Who else criticizes your dance?

***Lafayette:*** Queen Marie-Antoinette. One time we danced a quadrille. She laughed at me.

***Comtesse:*** (Deadpan. Looks at audience.) Queen Marie-Antoinette. (Seriously.) That would be King Louis XVI’s wife?

***Lafayette:*** One and the same.

***Comtesse:*** She’s a harlot.

***Adrienne:*** (Laughingly.) Mama!

***Comtesse:*** It’s true. I can speak my mind. We’re not in Paris.

***Adrienne:*** Well, we’re not far and walls have ears.

***Comtesse:*** She gambles. She flirts. (Thumbs all the while through the book of Latin.) I know she and the Vicomtes de Noailles are an item. I know he is your best friend, but I must say he should not encourage her.

***Lafayette:*** Mama, he does not encourage her.

***Comtesse:*** True. She needs no encouragement.

***Lafayette:*** Everybody likes Noailles. He must be the best horseman in all of France. He gambles, but he wins. He drinks, but he keeps a clear head. He turns vice to virtue.

***Adrienne:*** You envy him.

***Lafayette:*** He is a good dancer.

***Comtesse:*** Gilbert. You will I think never be a good dancer. Come. Gossip makes me hungry. (Takes his hand. Leads him to breakfast table with bread, butter, cheese.) Adrienne, bring the congolais. (Comtesse pours tea from a fresh pot for everyone. Lafayette and Adrienne sit close to one another, Comtesse across from Adrienne. Lafayette faces downstage.)

***Lafayette:*** I’ve got to go soon. I won’t be gone long.

***Comtesse:*** The Queen is full of dissipation. Young Noailles is full of dissipation. You (indicating Gilbert) are oil in that water.

***Adrienne:*** (Latin book in hand.) You never answered Mama. (Speaking to Lafayette.)

***Lafayette:*** What?

***Comtesse:*** “Verc-in-get-or-ix.” What is it?

***Lafayette:*** Vercingetorix. It’s Vercingetorix. The grandest warrior of all.

***Comtesse:*** Can’t be grand. Not with a name like that. Pick a hero I can pronounce. The name makes the man, I say. Caesar, maybe.

***Lafayette:*** Vercingetorix fought Caesar at the Battle of Alesia. He rallied Gauls against Caesar’s invasion.

***Adrienne:*** What happened?

***Lafayette:*** Caesar won. Rather than have his men slaughtered, Vercingetorix rode into Caesar’s camp on a majestic horse, alone. He dismounted, removed his body armour and placed it at Caesar’s feet. Caesar paraded him through the streets of Rome, then had him garroted.

***Comtesse:*** How awful…what is garroted?

***Lafayette:*** Strangled.

***Comtesse:*** I’d rather be strangled than garroted.

***Lafayette:*** Vincingetorix was about the Auvergne. He was about the people. Caesar was about the power.

***Comtesse:*** Well. Your father-in-law disagrees. For him, Caesar rules the ranks. He even admires his horse.

***Adrienne:*** His horse. How can you admire his horse?

***Comtesse:*** I don’t know how many times I’ve heard it. Genitor. The horse’s name is Genitor. Sight of the riding crop, just the sight of it my dear husband says, and Genitor would settle into harness. (Talking to Adrienne.) A disciplined mount, your father says. He admires discipline. He always looks at me when he tells the story, like I might take something away by hearing it.

***Adrienne:*** Papa can be severe.

***Lafayette:*** I had a professor, Rene Binet. He had us write an essay on “The Best Behaved Horse.”

***Comtesse:*** He expected you to write about some docile mount. A respecter of the riding crop, I suppose.

***Lafayette:*** I wrote that a riding crop raised was permit to throw the rider. (All quiet at table.)

***Comtesse:*** Papa would never understand that. Statuettes of Caesar and Genitor ornament his study. You, sir (indicating Lafayette), best keep your opinions to yourself.

***Lafayette:*** He’s so sure of himself.

***Comtesse:*** Who?

***Lafayette:*** Papa. He knows what he thinks and he’s not afraid to say it.

***Comtesse:*** I don’t know. Sometimes he says what he thinks without thinking. Can the brain belch? No, seriously. Can something bubble up out of the brain and out the mouth almost all at once? He does that. A brain belch.

***Adrienne:*** Mama! You are impossible.

***Lafayette:*** He’s done something with his life. He’s a commander…He’s a chemist.

***Comtesse:*** (Now playing with the cup and ball.) Are you afraid of him?

***Lafayette:*** I watched him at the negotiation. He was quiet. He listened. Nothing escaped him, I could just tell. Then he stated his case and he was done…

***Comtesse:*** You didn’t answer my question. Are you afraid of him?

***Adrienne:*** Of course he’s not afraid of him, are you?

***Lafayette:*** (Comtesse and Adrienne look at him, questioning.) I want to be like him.

***Comtesse:*** (Stands. Takes his face in her hands.) Here is what I think. You want his respect. (Drops her hands. Continues to look at him.)

***Lafayette:*** (After a moment.) I want him to like me.

***Comtesse:*** It’s not the same thing. If you want him to like you, it’s easy. Just do what he tells you. But if you want him to respect you, you must first find your ground. Then show him you have found it.

***Lafayette:*** There is the problem. I have no ground. I have no cause. I have no purpose.

***Comtesse:*** It’ll come to you. Be vigilant. And for God’s sake don’t tell Papa you find Caesar inferior to what’s his name…

***Lafayette:*** Vercingetorix.

***Adrienne:*** What negotiation?

***Lafayette:*** Your dowry. (Returns. Sits.)

***Comtesse:*** Five daughters. Five dowrys. Odd custom. Selling offspring.

***Adrienne:*** Why was I not there?

***Comtesse:*** Me. You were not there because of me. You were twelve. I wasn’t convinced the match would work.

***Lafayette:*** The skeptic.

***Comtesse:*** I was a cynic, I admit it. You (speaking to Lafayette.) were only fourteen. You were a country boy. Everybody knows country boys eat with their fingers, walk slow, think slow, and look stupid.

***Adrienne:*** Mama!

***Comtesse:*** You were from the Auvergne. Nothing good comes out of the south. You were an orphan. And the worst: You were rich. Very. Very. Rich. (Enunciates each word.)

***Lafayette:*** None of it my making.

***Comtesse:*** Inherited or not, doesn’t matter. Rich city people are civil. Rich country people are blowhards. That’s what I thought.

***Adrienne:*** What changed your mind?

***Comtesse:*** We had a fight, your father and I. He wanted you both married right then. I refused. I locked him out of the bedroom.

***Adrienne:*** Mama, you did not!

***Comtesse:*** I did. For weeks. He was surly. He had liasons.

***Adrienne:*** Liasons?

***Comtesse:*** Trysts. An encounter of the sensual kind.

***Adrienne:*** Mama. I never knew.

***Comtesse:*** I never told you and why should I. There was no reason for you to know and it seems so long ago now.

***Adrienne:*** It seems so…I don’t Know…

***Comtesse:*** French.

***Lafayette:*** (Both look at Lafayette.) I didn’t do anything!

***Comtesse:*** Anyway, I agreed to the match on one condition.

***Adrienne:*** What?

***Comtesse:*** Delay. Wait till Gilbert was sixteen and you fourteen. He’d stay under our roof and under my eye. Any missteps and it was all off.

***Adrienne:*** Papa agreed?

***Comtesse:*** Of course. He knows I hold my ground.

***Adrienne:*** And what did you find out?

***Lafayette:*** Yes. What did you find out?

***Comtesse:*** About what?

***Adrienne:*** Gilbert! About what!

***Comtesse:*** I discovered a quiet boy. Thoughtful. Smart. Loyal. Your father could not have found a better match. Even if he had actually thought about it. (Break. All sip tea.)

***Adrienne:*** (Looking at back cover of the Latin Book.) These embossed letters on back. What are these, above your crest. The same ones you wrote over and over on the inside cover.

***Lafayette:*** “Vis sat contra fatum.” My motto.

***Comtesse:*** Say it slowly.

***Lafayette:*** “Vis.”

***Comtesse:*** Adrienne, like we used to do…(Signals Adrienne to join in with her.)

***Comtesse and Adrienne:*** “Vis.”

***Lafayette:*** “Sat.”

***Comtesse and Adrienne:*** “Sat.”

***Lafayette:*** “Contra.”

***Comtesse and Adrienne:*** “Contra.”

***Lafayette:*** “Fatum.”

***Comtesse and Adrienne:*** “Fatum.”

***Lafayette:*** “Vis sat contra fatum.”

***Comtesse:*** (Looking at Adrienne, eyes inviting, hand outstretched, as if conducting an orchestra.) All together now: (Lafayette looking on, arched eye, sitting back in chair, skeptically.)

***Comtesse and Adrienne:***

Vis Sat Contra Fatum. (Straight.)

Vis Sat Contra Fatum. (Harmony.)

Vis Sat Contra Fatum. (Bass.)

***Comtesse:*** (Claps her hands, joyously.) What great fun. Whatever does it mean?

***Lafayette:*** You have more fun not knowing.

***Adrienne:*** No, no. What does it mean, really? (Dead silence.)

***Lafayette:*** “Vigor suffices against fate.”

***Comtesse and Adrienne:*** (Serious at first; they cannot keep a straight face, both break out laughing.)

***Comtesse:*** (Stands, takes Adrienne by the arm.) Come, Adrienne. (Playfully. Facing downstage, arms interlocked, and they step off in cadence, left then right, one leg crossing the other’s leg in step.)

***Comtesse and Adrienne:*** “Vis sat contra fatum.” (They pirouette, clap and laugh.)

***Lafayette:*** (Smiles. Waves them off.) What did I deserve to get you two?

***Adrienne:*** (Runs to Lafayette, throws her arms around his neck, looks into his eyes. He forgets himself a moment only to realize his mother-in-law is watching. He cuts his eyes toward her, clears his throat, signaling reserve to Adrienne. Adrienne releases him, straightens her dress.)

***Comtesse:*** (Throws her arms up exasperated.) My God, Gilbert. I have five daughters. You think a kiss will embarrass me? Well. You had your chance. Be off with you. (Walks to Lafayette, pushes him to the door, stage right.) Bring yourself back inoculated. (Stands at door. Waves gently, turns to come back in. Thinks better of it and returns to the door.) “Vis sat contra fatum” to you. (Returns to breakfast table alongside Adrienne, who is picking up and fiddling about.)

***Adrienne:*** (Wistful.) Mama, I never want to leave this place.

***Comtesse:*** Treasure the moment.

***Adrienne:*** You and Papa. Were you this happy?

***Comtesse:*** (Hesitates.) Once.

***Adrienne:*** Once?

***Comtesse:*** There was a time. I remember the moment I knew he loved me. (Walks downstage.) I had smallpox. He thought I would die. After they bled me three times they said that was it. Three times and then you call the priest. Doctors said there was nothing more to do. They refused to let you girls visit me.

***Adrienne:***  Because of the smallpox.

***Comtesse:*** No, no. They said the excitement might kill me. They said I would die, but your visiting me would make me go sooner. Your father would have none of it. He was certain I would die if I were not allowed to see my children. Idiots, he called them. He stopped the bleedings. He threw them out. Then he escorted you and your sisters to my bed. You don’t remember. He lined you up. It was like you were on parade. It was all he knew to do. I am sure his impulse was to have you salute me. Instead, he ordered each, in turn, to kiss me on the forehead. It was the only free space without sores. Then he said, “Now, get better.” (Pause.) And I did.

***Adrienne:*** What a wonderful story. (Deliberates.) Why must things change?

***Comtesse:*** The pineal gland.

***Adrienne:*** What?

***Comtesse:*** The pineal gland. (Said with emphasis. Moves to credenza and the stack of clothes which she proceeds to fold.)

***Adrienne:*** (Puttering with dishes.) The pineal gland?

***Comtesse:*** (Stands looking at Adrienne.) Here is a fact undeniable: Men are capable of grand stupidity.

***Adrienne:*** (Chuckles.) Mama!

***Comtesse:*** It’s true. It’s because the pineal gland; in men it squats in front of the seat of common sense. Men grow older and the pineal gland grows fatter. Common sense is crushed to the back of the head.

***Adrienne:*** Is this your idea?

***Comtesse:*** Renes Descartes. French philosopher. He says the pineal gland is the seat of the soul. I say it is the seat of stupid. It explains men.

***Adrienne:*** (Runs to Comtesse. Hugs her.) Papa has a runaway pineal gland?

***Comtesse:*** Huge.

***Adrienne:***  How can you tell?

***Comtesse:*** (Walks back downstage.) There was a time when he would confide in me. He was gentle. But now. He’s bluster. He said I couldn’t come with you on this trip, for Gilbert’s inoculation. Naturally, I had to come. If I give in to him it swells his pineal so I couldn’t give in.

***Adrienne:*** Why is Papa harsh with Gilbert?

***Comtesse:*** I didn’t give your father a son. He wanted one. Badly. He wants Gilbert to be the son he never had. He has this idea. About the perfect son. Popular. Rides hard. Gambles and wins. Handles his drink. Does what he tells him to.

***Adrienne:*** Vicomte de Noailles.

***Comtesse:*** Gilbert is different cloth. He aspires to more. He is an idealist.

***Adrienne:*** If his pineal gland doesn’t get in the way.

***Comtesse:*** You are your mother’s daughter. Your Gilbert must find his own way. As your mother I must caution you: he is at risk for the liason.

***Adrienne:*** Is that on account of the pineal gland.

***Comtesse:*** No. This is French.

***Adrienne:*** (Thoughtful.) Must we return to Paris?

***Comtesse:*** Chaillot is pleasant. But we’d tire of it, I suppose. Besides, Gilbert must be at Metz for maneuvers. I must rescue Papa from his follies, and you will soon attend to family.

***Adrienne:*** Mama, how do you come to know so much?

***Comtesse:*** The world underestimates women. This is to our advantage. One day the world will find out. We will have more, but we may be less. (Shrugs.) Enough. Let us have a game of chess.

(Lights out as she fetches chess board.)