

8

Madame de Tourvel to Madame de Volanges
From the Château de —, 9 August 17—

I'm so touched by your confiding in me, dear Madame. No one could be more interested in your daughter's future than I am and I wish her with heart and soul all the happiness which she surely deserves and which I'm sure your wisdom will guarantee. I do not know Monsieur de Gercourt personally but I can only have the highest opinion of him now that you have singled him out to be your son-in-law. I need only express the hope that her marriage is as happy and successful as my own, for which you were also responsible and for which I'm more grateful to you than ever. I hope that your daughter's happiness is the fitting reward for the happiness you have provided for me and that my best of friends becomes the happiest of mothers.

I'm truly sad that I shan't be able to come and offer my heartfelt good wishes to the bride in person and make her acquaintance as soon as I should have liked. Having enjoyed your truly motherly affection, I feel justified in hoping to find true sisterly love and friendship with your daughter. Please ask her, dear Madame, to share with me that feeling until such time as I am in a position to show that I'm worthy of it.

I'm expecting to stay on in the country for as long as my husband is away. I'm spending this time enjoying and benefiting from the company of Madame de Rosemonde, such a highly respected and ever charming lady who shows no signs of her advanced age; she has kept all her memory and all her sprightliness; her body may be eighty-four years old, her mind is still twenty.

Our cloistered existence is being enlivened by her nephew, the Vicomte de Valmont, who has kindly sacrificed a few days of his time to spend them in our company. I knew the Vicomte only by reputation, which gave me no desire to get to know him any better. But I think his reputation does him some injustice. Down here, where he is freed from the whirligig of society, he talks surprisingly sound good sense and admits the error of his ways with an unusual frankness. He talks very openly to me and I

preach him very stern sermons. You know him and you will agree that converting him would be a feather in anyone's cap;* but in spite of his promises, I've no illusions—a fortnight in Paris will drive all my preaching out of his head. His stay here will at least have provided a break from his normal activities and my belief is that, with his way of life, the best thing for him to do is to do nothing at all. He knows I'm writing to you and has asked me to send you his kindest and most respectful regards. I send you mine as well, to the safe keeping of your unfailing kindness. With sincerest good wishes, yours, etc.

9

Madame de Volanges to Madame de Tourvel
11 August 17—

My dear young friend, I've never doubted the genuineness of your friendship or of your concern with everything regarding my affairs and this answer to your *reply** is not to elaborate on this point, which I trust can never be in any doubt for either of us. But I do feel that I cannot refrain from raising with you the question of the Vicomte de Valmont.

I must confess that I never expected to read that name in any letter of yours. What indeed can you and he have in common? You don't know the man; where could you have gained some insight into the mind of a rake? You mention his *unusual frankness*; yes indeed, any frankness from Valmont must be very unusual. He's even more deceitful and dangerous than he is pleasant and attractive. From his earliest youth he has never made the slightest move or uttered a single word without having some evil or criminal intent. Dear friend, you know me and you're well aware that, of all the qualities I strive after, tolerance is the one which I consider most precious. So if Valmont was a man dominated by the violence of his passions or, like thousands of others, powerless to resist the temptations of his age, though I would deplore his conduct, I should feel sorry for him and quietly wait for him to reform his ways and win back the respect of decent people. Valmont's not like that: his despicable behaviour is a matter of principle. He calculates precisely how far he

can pursue his abominable conduct without compromising himself, and to gratify his cruel and wicked nature without any risk, he's chosen to prey on women. I'm not thinking of those he may have seduced but of who knows how many he has ruined. You live a chaste and sheltered life and such scandalous adventures never reach your ears; yet I could tell you some that would make you shudder with horror; but your eyes are as pure as your soul and would be defiled by such insights. You feel confident that Valmont can never be a danger to you, so that you've no need of any such warning to defend yourself. I'd like to tell you just one thing: of all the women to whom he has paid his attentions, whether successfully or not, not one has failed to regret it. The Marquise de Merteuil is the sole exception; she is the only woman who has managed to resist him and frustrate his evil designs; indeed, her exemplary conduct in this compensated in everyone's eyes for certain regrettable indiscretions of hers which occurred shortly after her husband's death.*

However that may be, dear, dear friend, my age and experience and above all my friendship for you entitle me to draw your attention to the fact that people are beginning to take notice of Valmont's absence and if it becomes known that he may have formed part of a threesome with you and his aunt, your reputation will be in his hands, which is the ultimate misfortune for any woman. I advise you to urge his aunt to cut short her invitation to him and if he persists in wanting to stay, I think you should not hesitate to leave yourself.

But why should he want to stay? What is he doing tucked away in the country anyway? If you got someone to keep an eye on his comings and goings, I feel sure you'd find that he's chosen his aunt's place merely as a convenient cover for carrying out some nefarious scheme in the neighbourhood.* And since there's no remedy for evil, we must do what we can to protect ourselves from it as far as possible.

Goodbye, my dear young friend. My daughter's marriage will now have to be postponed for a while: we were expecting the Comte de Gercourt to be arriving any day but he has now sent word that his regiment has been ordered to Corsica* and as there is still talk of war, he can't possibly be free before winter. This is tiresome but it gives me hope that we shall have the pleasure

of seeing you at the wedding. I was annoyed that it might have taken place without you. So, goodbye once more from your ever faithful and ever sincere friend, yours, etc.

PS My kindest regards to Madame de Rosemonde, with all the affection which I feel, as ever, she richly deserves.

10

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont

12 August 17—

Are you sulking? Or dead, possibly? Or are you living only for your judge's wife—much the same thing, by the way? This woman, who's given you back your *youthful illusions*, will soon be giving you back its absurd prejudices as well. You're already timid and submissive; you might just as well be in love. So you're saying goodbye to your *swashbuckling exploits*? In other words, you're behaving in a completely unprincipled manner and relying purely on chance or rather, on the whim of the moment. Have you forgotten that, like medicine, love is nothing but *the art of giving Nature a helping hand*? As you see, I'm fighting you with your own weapons but I'm not going to crow over it because I'm fighting someone who's already bitten the dust. *She must give herself*, say you. Of course she must and she'll give herself like all the others, except that it'll not be willingly. But for her ultimately to give herself, the best way is to start off by having her. Such a laughable distinction really is an aberration of love! And I use the word love because you are in love and if I told you otherwise I'd be misleading you and preventing you from seeing what your trouble is. So tell me, my faint-hearted swain, do you really think that all these women you've had were raped? Nevertheless, however keen we are to give ourselves and however quickly we'd like it to happen, we still need some pretext. And can you tell me a more convenient one than seeming to submit to force? Let me be honest: for me one of the most gratifying things is a sharp, well-conducted assault in which everything takes place in the proper order but smartly, so that we're never placed in the tiresome and awkward predicament of having to overlook certain technical weaknesses which we ought really to have taken

To see you just for a second, to be able to renew my pledge to love you for ever and ever and to hear you say those very same words . . . Isn't your happiness still inextricably bound up with mine? Ah, if not, that is a hateful thought that I utterly reject; it would be the death-blow to all my hopes. You love me and you always will: that's what I believe, that's something I'm certain of, something I can never doubt . . . But my situation is frightful and I can't bear it any longer. Goodbye, Cécile.*

81

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont

Paris, 20 September 17—

Oh, my dear Vicomte, how my heart bleeds for you! And how your fears do indeed prove my superiority! And you want to be my guide and tutor? Oh, you poor dear, what a gap still exists between us! And not even all your male pride would ever succeed in bridging it! Just because you couldn't carry through my schemes, you think they're impossible. And this weak, vain character actually has the effrontery to assess my capabilities and my resources! Truly, Vicomte, I can't conceal the fact that your advice had made me very cross indeed.

If, to disguise your incredibly inept handling of your judge's wife, you try to parade triumphantly your success in having, for one short second, disconcerted that shy young woman who loves you, all right, I'll agree. If you manage to extract a glance, one single glance, from her, well, I shall merely smile and let you enjoy your glance. If, realizing, in spite of yourself, the pettiness of your conduct, you hope to distract my attention by humouring me with an account of your sublime effort to bring together two young people, both positively yearning to meet and who, by the way, owe that yearning entirely to my efforts, all right again, I'm prepared to grant you that, too. If, finally, basing yourself on these glorious actions, you claim the right to inform me pompously that *it's better to spend your time carrying out your plans than talking about them*, well, that's merely a bit of harmless vanity that doesn't affect me and I forgive you. But if you imagine that I need your prudential wisdom, that I'd be lost if I didn't defer

to your advice and that I should in consequence refuse myself a pleasure, something that tickles my fancy, well there, Vicomte, you really are taking the trust I'm prepared to have in you too much for granted.

In point of fact, what have you ever done that I haven't done a thousand times better? You've seduced and even ruined large numbers of women but what difficulties did you ever encounter in making all your conquests? What obstacles did you have to overcome? What credit can you actually claim for yourself in all that? Good looks? Pure chance. Social graces? How could anybody avoid picking those up if he spends a lot of time in society. Wit? Certainly; but at a pinch fashionable jargon will work just as well. Highly commendable impudence? Yes, but perhaps entirely attributable to your first easy conquests. Unless I'm much mistaken, that's your entire equipment. After all, with regard to any fame you may have acquired, I imagine you won't mind if I don't attach much importance to your skill in creating or taking advantage of scandal!

As for prudential wisdom or subtlety, I won't speak for myself, but is there a single woman who hasn't got more than you? Take your own case: that judge's wife is leading you by the nose.

Believe me, Vicomte, people rarely acquire qualities they can do without.* When there's no danger, why give a damn? In fact, for you males, defeats merely mean fewer successes. In this highly unfair contest, if we don't lose, it's our good luck and if you don't win, it's just bad luck for you. Even if I were to grant that you have as many gifts as we have, we'd still be that much better than you because we need to make use of them all the time.

Very well, let's assume that you require as much skill to conquer us as we do to defend—or not to defend—ourselves; but you must at least agree that once you've succeeded, your skill has lost its point. You'll be completely absorbed in your new enjoyment and abandon yourselves to it unconditionally, without any qualms: for you, it's quite unimportant how long it lasts.

In fact, in this mutual exchange of the bonds of love, to use the current jargon, only you men are able to decide whether to strengthen them or break them. We can consider ourselves lucky indeed if, in your flighty way, you prefer to lie low rather than show off and are content merely to humiliate us by deserting us

and not turn the woman you worshipped yesterday into today's victim!

But should some unfortunate woman find her shackles irksome before the man does, what risks she has to run if she attempts to slip out of them or even dares to shake them! What fear and trembling, should she try to escape from a man whom in her heart she finds repugnant! And if he stubbornly clings on, then fear will force her to grant him what she used to grant out of love: her arms still open though her heart is closed; and to undo those bonds which you men would merely have snapped she will need great care and cunning. She's at her enemy's mercy; if he acts shabbily, she's helpless. And how can he be expected to behave otherwise when, though he may sometimes be praised for being generous, he's never blamed for being the opposite?

You'll surely not deny such self-evident truths which have now become commonplace. If, however, you have noticed me, regardless of the circumstances and of public opinion, making these males jump like puppets to my fads and fancies, imposing my will on some and rendering the others powerless to harm me; if, following the vagaries of my likes and dislikes, I've either enrolled into my following of admirers or else sent packing those throneless tyrants who have become our slaves;* if, in the course of all these frequent and violent changes, my reputation has remained unscathed, mustn't you have been forced to conclude that, having been born to avenge my sex and subjugate yours, I must have succeeded in elaborating certain methods hitherto unknown?

Oh, Vicomte, you must save your advice and your misgivings for those frenzied women, self-styled *women of feeling*, whose heated imagination would lead one to think that nature had put their senses in their heads, who have never given the matter proper thought and continually confuse love with the lover, who suffer from the wild delusion that the man whom they have chosen for their pleasure is the only one capable of providing them with it and are so truly superstitious that they offer the priest the respect and belief which properly belongs only to Eros himself.

And please reserve your fears also for those women whose vanity outruns their caution and, when it comes to the point, can't face the prospect of getting their lover to leave them.

But above all, reserve your greatest fears for those restless, idle females whom you call sensitive and who fall so easily and so helplessly into the grip of love, who feel the need to think about it even when they're not experiencing it and hurl themselves headlong into the turmoil of their ideas, producing those letters so full of tenderness and so dangerous to write and who aren't afraid of entrusting this evidence of weakness to the object of their affection: foolhardy women who are incapable of recognizing in their current lover their future enemy.

But what have I got in common with these feckless women? When did you last see me depart from the rules which I've laid down for myself and be untrue to my principles? I say my principles deliberately since I don't mean other women's hazardous principles, accepted uncritically and followed out of sheer habit; mine are the fruit of deep cogitation, created by myself. I can truly say that I am a self-made woman.

When I went into society I was still a child, required to be seen and not heard; but I made use of my inactivity to observe and reflect. While people thought me scatterbrained or dreamy, paying little attention to the words of wisdom they were so keen to impart, I was carefully noting everything they were trying to conceal.

This curiosity helped my education by teaching me how to dissemble; being frequently obliged to hide what I was observing from the eyes of those around me, I tried to control my own and ever since I've been able to put on that dreamy look which you've so often admired. Encouraged by this early success, I tried similarly to control my facial expressions.

If I felt distressed I made a great effort to look composed or even delighted; I even went so far as to deliberately cause myself pain and practise looking pleased at the same time. I made a similar effort, though this was harder, to repress the outward signs of any unexpected joy. This is how I've managed to achieve that mastery over my features that I've noticed sometimes so surprises you.

I was still young and not very interesting; but my thoughts were the only things that belonged to me and I felt indignant that someone might snatch them from me or detect them against my will. Thus armed, I was keen to try my hand: not content with preventing people from reading my thoughts, I delighted in showing off different aspects of myself: having mastered my gestures, I directed my attention to my words and controlled both of them according to the situation or even as my whims dictated. From that time onward, I was in complete command of my thoughts and I revealed only the ones it was useful for me to show.

Analysing myself had made me interested in faces and the way they reveal character; it gave me that insight which experience has taught me not to trust completely but which, all things considered, has rarely let me down.

I still wasn't fifteen and I already possessed the skills to which the majority of our politicians owe their success; yet I was still a novice in the science which I wished to master.

You can imagine that like all young girls, I was curious to learn about love and pleasure; but not having been brought up in a convent, without any close friend of my own sex and under the ever-watchful eye of my mother, I had only the vaguest of notions which I couldn't exactly define. Even nature, which has certainly been very kind to me since, didn't as yet give me any hint; it seemed almost as if she was working silently to bring her work to perfection. But my head was seething: I didn't want the delights of love, I wanted to know about it. This desire for information suggested to me how I might approach the matter.

I had the feeling that the only man whom I could talk to about it without compromising myself was my confessor. I made up my mind on the spot; swallowing my slight embarrassment, I boldly laid claim to a sin which I hadn't committed, accusing myself of *doing everything that women do*. That was how I put it but I honestly didn't know what I was talking about. My hopes were neither completely dashed nor entirely satisfied: I was prevented from finding out what I wanted to know by fear of giving myself away; but the good reverend father made my trespass sound so cataclysmic that I concluded it must be extremely

pleasurable and my desire for knowledge was replaced by the desire to enjoy it.

I've no idea where that particular desire might have led me; being completely innocent, I might perhaps have been ruined by just one experience. Luckily for me, a few days later my mother announced that I was going to be married, so being now certain of learning all about it, my curiosity immediately evaporated and I landed up in Monsieur de Merteuil's arms *virgo intacta*.

When the moment of truth eventually came, I felt so calm and collected that I had to keep my wits about me to put on the proper embarrassment and reluctance. That first night which girls normally look forward to as something very nice or expect to be rather horrid, I believed purely as an experience: I took accurate note of the pain and the pleasure and saw my various sensations merely as a means of gathering information for later evaluation.

I soon developed a taste for this sort of study but true to my principles and perhaps instinctively sensing that my husband must be the last person to be taken into my confidence, I resolved, just because I was attracted by love, to show myself as completely unfeeling with him. This apparent frigidity was later to provide the basis for his blind and unhesitating trust in me. After careful thought, I added to this an image of a scatterbrain, justified by my tender years. He never thought me more of a child than when I was giving my most barefaced impersonation of one.

However, I admit that at first I allowed myself to be carried away in the whirl of society and gave myself up entirely to its futile distractions. But a few months later, after Monsieur de Merteuil had carried me off into his gloomy country estate, dread of being bored revived my interest in my studies and as the people surrounding me down there were so inferior in rank as to preclude any suspicion, I was able to extend my field of operations. In particular, it was now that I was able to satisfy myself that love, so highly commended as the cause of our pleasures, is at most nothing but the pretext for them.*

These agreeable pastimes were cut short by Monsieur de Merteuil's illness; I was obliged to follow him back to Paris where he went for treatment. As you know, he died a short time

later and though, by and large, I had no grudge against him, nevertheless I keenly appreciated the freedom I'd be enjoying as a widow and I made myself a solemn promise not to waste it.

My mother was expecting me either to go into a convent or to go back and live with her. I refused both these courses and my only concession to the proprieties was to return to the same country estate where I still had some investigations to complete. I complemented them from books but you mustn't assume that they were purely the ones you think.* I studied our manners and customs in novels, our views on life in the philosophers, I even tried to discover how our most high-minded moralists want us to behave, thereby ascertaining what you could do, what you ought to think, and the appearances you must keep up. Once I knew these three things, the only one that presented any problems was the last: I hoped to solve them and I set my mind to it.

I was beginning to become bored with countrified pastimes which didn't provide the necessary variety for my lively mind. I was feeling the need to be flirtatious and this reconciled me to love, not of course to feeling it but to inspiring it and shamming it. In spite of reading and being told that it was impossible to fake love, I could see that all I needed was a writer's wit and the gifts of an actor. I practised both of these skills, perhaps not unsuccessfully; but instead of courting the empty applause of theatre audiences, I resolved that whereas so many people squander their talents to satisfy their vanity, I would use mine for pleasure.

A year passed in these different pursuits. As my mourning was now over, I could again go back into society and I returned to Paris, full of my grand design. I immediately struck an entirely unexpected obstacle.

My solitary existence and my long retreat had given me a gloss of prudery which scared off the smartest of the young men about town. They held off and left me at the mercy of a host of bories who all wanted to marry me. Turning them down was no trouble but some of the rejects were approved of by my family and in the course of these domestic squabbles I wasted a lot of time that I had been promising myself to spend so agreeably. So in order to attract the smart young men back and scare off the others, I was compelled to commit some public indiscretions and put as much effort into spoiling my reputation as I had hoped to put into

keeping it. As you may imagine, I had no difficulty at all. But as I steered clear of passion, I did only as much as I felt necessary and dispensed my peccadilloes in discreet doses.

As soon as I'd achieved my objective, I did an about-turn, giving the credit for my conversion to a few of those women who, since they have no possible claim to being attractive, take refuge in integrity and high principles. It was a master-stroke which succeeded beyond all my expectations. In their gratitude these superannuated matrons became my staunchest supporters and their blind devotion to my cause—they described my reform as their work—reached such heights that at the slightest comment anyone dared to make, the whole tribe of puritans cried 'shame!' and 'scandal!' Similarly I also won the support of our aspiring sirens who, being convinced that I was giving up competing against them, insisted on covering me with praise every time they were anxious to demonstrate that they didn't slander everybody all the time.

Meanwhile my earlier conduct had brought back the lovers and in order to propitiate them as well as my injudicious champions, I put myself forward as impressionable but difficult to please, a woman whose extreme fastidiousness made her proof against love.

I now started to deploy the skills I'd developed on the big stage. My first concern was to gain a reputation for being invincible. To acquire this, the only men whose attentions I seemed to be accepting were the ones I couldn't in fact stand. I used these to establish myself as a woman who said no; meanwhile I could say yes to the man of my choice without risk. However, my pretence of demureness prevented him from ever being able to join me in society. In this way, the eyes of the company were always directed on the *hapless* lover.

You know how quickly I make up my mind. I do this because I've noticed that it's almost always the preliminary manoeuvres which give a woman away; however hard one tries, the tone before and after succeeding is never the same. This difference never escapes the eye of any close observer. So I've found making the wrong choice less dangerous than letting it be found out. My method has the added advantage of eliminating the presumptions which are all that people have to go on.

Such precautions and the care I take never to write, never to provide evidence of my surrender, may seem excessive; for me, they never seemed really adequate. By looking deep into my own heart, I have been able to explore other people's and I've discovered that there is nobody who doesn't conceal a secret which it is essential never to let anyone find out. This is a truth which was better understood in the olden days than now, a truth perhaps subtly symbolized by the story of Samson. I'm a modern Dalila and like her, I've always been able to worm out that important secret. Ah, the number of Samsons whose hair I've got between the blades of my scissors! And as I'm not afraid of those any more, they're the only ones I've sometimes risked humiliating.* With the others, I've been more crafty. I've guaranteed their discretion by getting them to deceive me to avoid appearing fickle myself, pretending to be friendly, seeming to trust them, treating them generously, leaving each of them with the flattering thought of having been my only lover. And failing all that, I anticipate the end of the affair and make them look ridiculous or spread malicious gossip to destroy any credibility such dangerous men might have.

You have seen me using such tactics time and time again: how can you still have doubts as to my cautiousness? Just cast your mind back to the time when you first started paying me your attentions. I'd never felt more flattered; I wanted you even before I met you. I was fascinated by your prestige; I could see you as the finest feather in my cap and I couldn't wait to come to grips with you. You are the only one of my flames that ever for a second made me lose my self-control. Yet if ever you had wanted to ruin me, how could you possibly have done so? Empty words that leave no echo, that your reputation itself would have rendered suspect, a series of implausible acts which in any honest account would have looked like a badly constructed novel. True, since that time I have revealed all my secrets to you but you know the concerns we have in common and who is the reckless one of us two.*

Since I'm in the process of explaining myself to you, I want to do so thoroughly and accurately. I can hear you saying that my maid has the whiphand over me; indeed, even though she doesn't know my secret feelings, she does know my secret actions. When

you raised this point earlier, I merely told you that I was sure of her and my reply obviously put your mind at rest because since then you have yourself confided quite risky secrets of your own to her. But now that Prévan seems to be getting under your skin and causing you some confusion, I suspect you're no longer prepared to take my word for it. So let me enlighten you further.

In the first place, that woman is my foster-sister, a relationship which is hardly considered one by us but carries a good deal of weight with people of her class. Moreover, I know her secret and even more: she was once madly in love and paid the price; if I hadn't come to her rescue, she'd have been ruined. Her parents, bristling with honour, wanted nothing less than to shut her away in a convent. They came to see me. I saw at a glance that their wrath might be useful to me. I endorsed their plan and applied for and obtained the necessary order. Then I suddenly switched to a more lenient view, persuaded her parents, pulled strings with the old Minister and got them all to agree to leave the authority in my hands, with the power either to suspend or execute its provisions as I think fit, in the light of the girl's future behaviour. So she knows that her fate is in my hands and if, by some remote chance, these powerful inducements weren't enough to keep her quiet, isn't it quite obvious that revealing her past conduct and its legitimate punishment would quickly destroy her credibility?

These are what I describe as basic precautions but I use hundreds of others too, as the occasion or situation demands, relying on my brains and long experience, when the need arises. I won't bore you with the minutiae but I adhere to them most scrupulously and if you want to understand them properly you must take the trouble to look at them in the context of my conduct as a whole.

But to imagine that I've taken such care only to fail to reap the fruits of my labours; that having raised myself with such arduous efforts above the ordinary run of women, I could ever consent to cringe like them, wavering between cowardice and recklessness, and above all that I could be so scared of any man as to flee for my life, no, Vicomte, never, never! I must conquer or die in the attempt.* As for Prévan, I want to have him and have him I shall; he wants to tell and he won't: that's our romance in a nutshell. Goodbye.*

been likely to be put to that inconvenience without asking the reason. It's the little details that make for plausibility and plausibility makes fibs immaterial because nobody feels the need to check them.

Once you've read this letter, please read it again and even think it over, first, because to do something properly you have to know it properly, and secondly, to make sure in your own mind that I haven't omitted anything; I'm not in the habit of using such tricks for myself and I'm not very experienced; but for my close friendship with Danceny and the sympathy you have yourself aroused in me, I couldn't have brought myself to do it. I hate anything that has the slightest hint of deceit, I'm like that. But my heart has been so touched by your misfortunes that I'm prepared to make every effort to alleviate them.

You will, of course, realize that once this line of communication has been opened between us, it will be far easier for me to arrange the meeting which Danceny wants with you. But don't say anything to him about this for the moment. You would only be making him more impatient and the time is not yet quite right to satisfy him. I think you have to calm him down rather than make him disgruntled. I'll leave it to your own tact. Goodbye, my lovely ward, because I do look on you as my ward and I hope you may feel a little fond of your guardian and, above all, do what he tells you. It's for your own good. I am making every effort to ensure your happiness and you can be certain that when you're happy, so shall I be.

85

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont

Paris, 25 September 17—, 7 p.m.

Now you can at last relax and, above all, give me my due. Listen to what I have to tell you and stop mistaking me for all those other females: I've just polished off my adventure with Prévan—*polished off*: I do hope you get my exact meaning. And now you'll be able to judge which of us has something to brag about. Telling it won't be quite as much fun as doing it and anyway, it wouldn't be fair for you, who've done nothing more than produce argu-

ments, good or bad, on this whole business, to enjoy it as much as I did, seeing that I've been giving it such a lot of my time and attention.

However, if you have some major coup of your own in mind, if you're contemplating some exploit where he might have been of concern as a potentially dangerous rival, now's your chance, he's left the coast clear for you, at least for a while; he may even never recover from the blow I've dealt him.

Aren't you lucky to have me as a friend! I'm your good fairy. There you were pining away far from the beauty who has you in her thrall and with one word from me, abracadabra—you're back with her. You want to get even with a woman who has done you wrong—I point out the exact spot to strike and hand her over to you on a plate. And finally, you turn to me to remove a formidable competitor from the lists and, hey presto!—I fulfil your desire. Truly, Vicomte, if you don't spend the rest of your life offering up thanks to me, you're an ungrateful beast. But let's come back to my adventure and start from the beginning.

You remember my letter of 15 September? My loud announcement* as I left the Opéra did *not* fall on deaf ears. Prévan duly turned up and when the Maréchale remarked in her friendly way how flattered she felt at seeing him at one of her gatherings twice in a row, he took great pains to explain how he had called off absolutely hundreds of engagements that Tuesday evening so as to be free. Forewarned is forearmed! However, since I wished to establish more definitely if I really was the object of this flattering enthusiasm, I tried to force this most recent of my admirers to choose between me and his real passion: I stated that I would not be playing cards and, lo and behold, he too found absolutely hundreds of excuses not to play either. My first victory was achieved over lansquenets.*

As my partner in conversation I enlisted the Bishop of —,*. I chose him because he has connections with this hero of the hour and I wanted to offer him every chance of approaching me. I was also very glad to provide myself with a respectable witness who could, if need arose, give evidence of my behaviour and speech. This arrangement worked like a charm.

After the usual small talk, Prévan quickly took over the conversation and struck various notes one after the other to see

which one I might respond to. Sentiment I firmly rejected, as a sceptic; I put a stop to any banter by looking serious: that was too frivolous a gambit; he had to fall back on a gently friendly tone and it was under this undistinguished banner that we launched out on our joint campaign.

At supper-time, the Bishop didn't go down so Prévan handed me in and naturally sat down beside me. Let's give honour where honour's due: he kept our private discourse moving very adroitly while appearing concerned only with the general conversation, where he seemed to be doing all the talking. Over dessert, a new play was mentioned as being given at the Comédie-Française the following Monday. I remarked that I was sorry not to have my box available then; he offered his; I refused, of course, as expected; hereupon he replied rather amusingly that I had misinterpreted him: he would certainly never give up his box to someone he didn't know, he was merely letting me know that his box would be at Madame la Maréchale's disposal. She joined in the joke and I accepted.

After we'd gone back up to the drawing-room, as you can imagine he asked if he might have a seat in that box and when the Maréchale, who treats him in a very friendly way, promised him he might, *if he behaved himself*, he seized the opportunity to embark on one of those ambiguous conversations which you told me he was so good at. Falling down on his knees like a good little boy, so he said, as an excuse to ask her advice and appeal to her judgement, he paid a large number of compliments of a rather affectionate nature which it was easy for me to take for myself. Since a good few people hadn't gone back to cards after supper, the conversation became more general and less interesting; but our eyes spoke volumes. I said our eyes but I ought to say his, for mine spoke only one language: surprise. He must have thought I was amazed and extremely preoccupied by the prodigious effect he was having on me. I think I left him greatly satisfied; and I wasn't at all dissatisfied myself.

The following Monday I went to the Comédie-Française as we'd arranged. In spite of your great literary curiosity, I can't tell you a single thing about the performance except that Prévan has an outstanding gift for flattery and that the play was a flop: that was all I managed to gather. I was sorry to see the evening

coming to an end for I was really enjoying myself, so in order to prolong my pleasure, I invited the Maréchale to come back to supper at my place; this provided me with an excuse to ask the charming flatterer too; he merely asked for a few moments to dash round to the Comtesses de P—— to make his apologies. Their names* refuelled my wrath; it was obvious he was starting his tale-telling. I recalled your wise counsels and made a promise . . . to pursue my adventure, certain that I would be able to cure him of this dangerous habit of indiscretion.

Not being part of my circle of friends, of whom there weren't very many that evening, he had to show me the customary civilities, so when supper was announced, he offered me his hand. As I accepted I mischievously imparted a slight tremor to mine and as we walked in, I kept my eyes lowered and breathed heavily, seeming as though I was foreshadowing my downfall and apprehensive of my conqueror. He took note of all this wonderfully well and the gay deceiver now changed his tone and his demeanour on the spot. Till then he'd been urbane; he now grew loving. Not that his words were different, for our circumstances prevented him from speaking in any other way, but his glances became less spirited and more tender, his voice more softly inflected, his smile less sly and more smug. And then as he spoke, his wit gradually lost its sparkle, he became gentle. I ask you, Vicomte, could you have done any better yourself?

For my part, I took on such a dreamy look that people were forced to take notice of it; and when they took me to task, I carefully launched into clumsy protestations, looked flustered and cast a quick sly glance at Prévan, encouraging him to believe that my only fear was in fact that he might guess why I was upset.

After supper, I took advantage of one of those stories that our good Maréchale never fails to tell and stretched out voluptuously on my ottoman in a dreamily rapt attitude. I was not sorry for Prévan to see me so preoccupied and in fact he honoured me with his very special attention. You'll understand how reluctant I was for my shy glances to cross the eyes of my conqueror but when in all humility I did turn them towards him, they quickly informed me that I was achieving the desired effect. I still had to persuade him that I shared his feelings, so when the Maréchale announced that she would have to go, I exclaimed in a melting

voice: 'Oh dear, it was so lovely lying there!' However, I stood up but before we parted I asked her what plans she had, so as to have an excuse for telling her mine and I let her know that I should be 'At home' two days later. After which, we all went our separate ways.

I now put on my thinking cap. I had no doubt Prévan would take advantage of the quasi-rendezvous that I had just suggested, that he would turn up early so as to find me alone, and that he'd make a spirited attack; but I felt absolutely sure, too, that in the light of my reputation, he would not treat me with the lack of ceremony which anyone with the smallest claim to being a gentleman would show only towards disreputable or inexperienced women; and that once he'd uttered the word love and above all if he supposed he could get me to say it, I could see no prospect of failure.*

It's such a convenience having dealings with you *men of strict principles!* Occasionally, some muddle-headed lover disconcerts you through his shyness or embarrasses you by his passionate raptures; it's a sort of fever like any other: it brings shivers and hot sweats and sometimes various other symptoms. But your clockwork routine is so easy to see through! Your arrival, your stance, your tone, your very words, I knew the lot before he arrived! So I won't bother you with the details of our conversation which you can easily fill in yourself. Note merely that while pretending to defend myself, I did all I could to help him along: embarrassment, to give him time to speak; weak arguments, for him to refute; fear and mistrust, to encourage his protests and this everlasting refrain of his: 'I'm only asking for one word'; and this silence of mine which seemed to be keeping him in suspense merely to make him more anxious to hear that magic word; and throughout all this palaver, a hand frequently grasped, as frequently withdrawn but never completely refused. . . . You could spend a whole day like that; we spent one solid hour; and perhaps we should still be at it if we hadn't heard a coach driving into my courtyard. As you would expect, this fortunate setback made him all the more pressing and seeing that I was now free from attack, I vouchsafed the magic word. People were announced and I was soon surrounded by quite a large number of callers.

Prévan asked if he could call on me the following morning and I agreed; but to guard against any surprises which I was anxious to avoid, I instructed my maid not to leave the bedroom all the time he was with me; as you know, you can see from there everything that happens in my dressing-room, where I received him. As we were able to talk freely and we both wanted the same thing, it didn't take long to come to an agreement: but we couldn't accept any unwelcome onlooker and this gave me the chance I was looking for.

So I now outlined my domestic arrangements to fit in with my plans and had no trouble in persuading him that we would never get a moment to ourselves and we must regard the golden opportunity we enjoyed yesterday as a sort of miracle which even then was fraught with dangers too great to risk again since someone might come into the drawing-room at any moment. I was careful to point out that this situation had arisen because up till now these habits had never caused me any inconvenience; at the same time, I emphasized how impossible it would be for me to change them without compromising myself in the eyes of my domestic staff. He tried to look disconsolate and upset and told me I didn't really love him; and you can guess how greatly affected I was by all this! However, being keen to strike a decisive blow, I took refuge in tears. It was a case of: *Zaire, you are weeping!*,* and all Orosmane's love was replaced by the thought of the power he had over me and the hope this gave him of ruining me at his own good pleasure.

Once this dramatic moment had been played out, we came back to settling our arrangements. Since daytime was impossible, we turned to the alternative of night; but there was an insurmountable obstacle—my doorkeeper—and I refused to allow any attempt to bribe him. He suggested the sidegate to my garden but I'd anticipated that and invented a watchdog who, meek as a lamb during the day, turned into a ravaging hellhound at night. My willingness to go into all these details was exactly designed to encourage him and he now came up with the most ridiculous stratagem of all, which I promptly accepted.

In the first place, it appeared that his servant was as trustworthy as himself—which I was quite prepared to believe: there's nothing to choose between the pair of them. I was to give

a big supper-party in my house; he'd be invited and would choose his own time to leave, alone. His wily accomplice would call for his carriage, open the door and he, Prévan, would surreptitiously slip away. His coachman couldn't possibly notice anything and so, being now still in my house although everybody would have seen him depart, the question was how to get up to my rooms. I confess that at first I had some trouble in finding enough poor arguments against his plan for him to seem to brush aside; he replied by quoting examples. Listening to him, you would have thought that it was the most normal thing in the world; he himself had used it a dozen times, in fact, it was his favourite method, since it was the least risky.

Bowing to these incontrovertible precedents, I frankly admitted the existence of a secret staircase leading up to the vicinity of my boudoir; I could leave the key in the door and he'd be able to shut himself in there and wait for my women to go to bed, without much risk. Then, to make my agreement sound more plausible, I changed my mind: I could only agree to our plan on condition that he promised to obey me unreservedly and behave himself properly. . . . Ah, behave properly! In a word, I was quite willing to prove my love for him but not to satisfy his.

I was forgetting to mention how he was finally intending to leave: he was to make his exit through the garden gate; he would need only to wait until daybreak, when my Cerberus* would be as silent as the grave. At that time, there's not a soul about and everyone's most soundly asleep. If you're surprised at such drivel it's because you're forgetting the situation existing between us: why should we need better arguments? He asked nothing better than for everything to be discovered, I was absolutely sure it wouldn't be. . . . We fixed the date for two days later.

Note that this whole thing had been arranged without Prévan's once being seen in my company. I'd met him at supper in the house of one of my friends; he'd offered her his box for a new play and I'd accepted a seat in it. I then invited that woman to supper, in Prévan's presence; I can hardly avoid inviting him to join us. He accepts and two days later pays the obligatory call on me. True, he does come to see me the following morning; but apart from the fact that morning visits don't count, all I need to do is to say that I looked on it as something of an impertinence

on his part and in fact I then place him fairly and squarely into the category of less intimate acquaintances by sending him a written invitation to a formal supper party. I can certainly say, with Annette: *And that was all there was to it!**

The fateful day arrived, that day when I was to lose my honour and my reputation; I gave my trusty Victoire her instructions which she carried out in the way you're about to see.

Meanwhile, evening came; when Prévan was announced, a lot of my guests had already arrived. I greeted him with pointed politeness to stress how slightly I knew him and sat him at the Maréchale's table, as it was through her that I had made his acquaintance. The evening brought forth nothing except a very short note that my discreet admirer managed to slip me and which I burned, in accordance with my usual practice. In it he assured me that I could rely on him and he wrapped this simple message up in the usual sycophantic words—love, happiness, and so forth—which never fail to crop up when such romps are concerned.

At midnight, as all the games had finished, I suggested a brief spell of gallimaufry.* This had the dual purpose of facilitating Prévan's exit and at the same time making it obvious to everybody, as it was bound to be, in view of his reputation as a gambler. I was also glad that people would be able to recall, if need be, that I'd been in no hurry to be left on my own.

The game lasted longer than I'd anticipated. The Devil was tempting me and I succumbed to my longing to go and comfort my impatient captive. So there I was, heading for disaster when the thought struck me that once I'd given myself completely, I'd no longer have the power to force him to remain decently dressed, as my plan required. I had the strength to resist. I retraced my steps and came back, rather crossly, to take part in the interminable game. However, end it finally did and everyone took themselves off. As for me, I rang for my maids, undressed in a flash, and sent them off too.

And now, Vicomte, behold me in my night attire, walking shyly and demurely to my doom, with hesitant hand opening the door to my future lord and master. He catches sight of me: it was like greased lightning. What can I say? Before I could utter a word to stop him or to defend myself, I was overrun, but com-

pletely overrun! So far, so good: but now he becomes disgruntled, he felt uncomfortable all dressed up, it was preventing him from making closer contact, he wanted to be in a state more appropriate to our situation, to come to grips with me on equal terms. But my extreme modesty thwarted his plans and my fondling hands left him no respite to put them into operation. He turned his attention to other things . . .

Having now doubled his stakes, he again started insisting. But this time it was my turn. 'Listen to me,' I said. 'Up till now the tale you'll have to tell the two Comtesses de P—— and hundreds of others will be rather droll; but I'll be interested to know how you'll be telling the sequel and end of your little adventure.' As I spoke, I tugged my bell-pull with all my might; this time, my action was quicker than his words. He was just beginning to stammer something when I heard Victoire come running in, calling out to the other servants she'd been keeping in her room, as I had instructed. Then, raising my voice and in my most regal tones, I proclaimed: 'Leave this room, Monsieur, and never have the audacity to appear in my sight again!' Thereupon, all my servants swarmed in.

Poor Prévau lost his head and mistaking what was just a bit of fun for an ambush, drew his sword but immediately regretted it, for my footman, a tough and plucky young man, seized him round the body and flung him down on the floor. I confess I was petrified. I called to my servants to stop and ordered them to let him go, making sure he left the premises at once. They obeyed but not without a great deal of loud and angry muttering: they were furious that their virtuous mistress had been subjected to such disrespect. They all escorted the hapless chevalier to the door with a great deal of noise and commotion, as I'd hoped. Only Victoire stayed behind to help me tidy up my bed.

My servants now came back, extremely agitated, and still in a state of shock I asked them how it was that, most luckily for me, they were still up; Victoire explained that she had had two of her women friends to supper and they had all gone on to continue the evening in her room; in fact, she told me precisely what we'd both arranged together. I thanked them all and told them they could go but sent one of them to fetch my doctor straight away. It seemed to me that I was justified in feeling apprehensive over

the effect of my appalling experience and this was guaranteed to spread the news and ensure complete notoriety for the incident.

The doctor came, commiserated with me, and merely prescribed rest. I also told Victoire to go out early that morning and gossip with all the neighbours.

All this was so successful that before noon, as soon as my door was open to receive visitors, my pious neighbour was already at my bedside to discover the truth and the lurid details of this adventure. I found myself obliged to join with her for a solid hour in expressing horror at the depravity of our times. A moment later I received a note from the Maréchale which I'm enclosing. And finally, before five o'clock, to my amazement, who should call but Monsieur ——, Prévau's commanding officer, who came, he said, to apologize for such extreme disrespect on the part of his officers. He'd only heard about it at dinner at the Maréchale's and on the spot had issued an order for Prévau to place himself under arrest, in gaol. I pleaded for him but in vain. So I thought that as an accomplice it was up to me to do my bit as well and at least observe house arrest: I gave out that I was indisposed and not at home to anyone.

And my solitary state is the explanation of this long letter. I'll be writing to Madame de Volanges as well, she'll certainly read it out to all and sundry and you'll be able to hear the official version which you have to pass on.

I forgot to tell you that Belleruche is livid and mad keen to call Prévau out. Poor boy! Fortunately I'll have time to set his mind at rest. Meantime I'm going to give mine some rest, too, it's tired of writing. Goodbye, Vicomte.

86

The Maréchale de —— to the Marquise de Merteuil

(note enclosed with letter 85)

Paris, 25 September 17——

Gracious Heavens, what is this extraordinary thing I've just heard, my dear? Is it possible for young Prévau to have behaved so disgustingly! and towards you, too! Oh, the trials we women have to bear! But something I shall never forgive myself for is

Mummy still hasn't said a single word about my marriage. But I'll watch out and when she does mention it, as she's setting a trap for me, I promise you I'll be able to pretend to her.

Goodbye, dear, kind Madame, and thank you very much indeed, I promise you I'll never forget all your kindness towards me. I must stop now because it's nearly one o'clock and Monsieur de Valmont won't be long now.

110

The Vicomte de Valmont to the Marquise de Merteuil

From the Château de —, 11 October 17—

*Heavenly powers! My soul has tasted the pangs of love; teach it to savour its delights!** I think it is the tender-hearted Saint-Preux who voices this wish. I'm better off than he, I'm enjoying both states of mind simultaneously. Yes, dear lady, I am at one and the same time very happy and very unhappy; and since I have complete trust in you, I owe it to you to tell you my double tale of woe and joy.

I have to inform you that my ungrateful and pious judge's wife has still not relented. At the last count, four of my letters have been returned unopened. Four is perhaps misleading: guessing that once the first one had been rejected, it would be succeeded by lots of others and being unwilling to waste my time in this pursuit, I decided to turn my sad story into the standard rignamole and leave them undated; so ever since the second one, it's been the same letter shuttling to and fro. I merely change the envelope. If one day my beloved grows tired of this shuttle service, she'll keep my epistle and then will be the time for me to bring it up to date. As you can see, with this new style of correspondence, I can hardly expect to make much progress or be any better informed than on the day it started.

I have however discovered that the flighty young body has changed her confidante; at any rate I have ascertained that since she left the château, no letter has come from her to Madame de Volanges whilst there have been two for old Rosemonde and since the latter hasn't mentioned this to me and is keeping completely mum on the subject of *her lovely friend* whereas

previously she never stopped talking about her, I concluded that this revolution has been brought about on the one hand by the need to talk about me and on the other by the coyness she may feel with Madame de Volanges at reverting to a feeling she has so long disclaimed. I fear that here again I have lost in the exchange: the older women are, the more sour and strict they become. The first one would certainly have said far nastier things about me but Madame de Rosemonde will talk to her more of love and our susceptible puritan is much more scared of the feeling than of the person.

My only means of keeping myself informed, as you will have gathered, is to intercept this clandestine exchange of letters. I've already given appropriate instructions to my valet and I'm expecting him to put them into effect any day now. Until then I can only operate at random, so for the last week I've been vainly going over every known way, in novels* or in my secret memoirs, without finding anything to fit either the circumstances of this adventure or the character of the heroine. It wouldn't be difficult to slip into her house, at night indeed, nor even to drug her and turn her into another Clarissa;* but imagine having to resort to methods so foreign to my nature after more than two months of laborious and meticulous effort! To gain a victory without glory by following slavishly in someone else's tracks! . . . No, she's not going to enjoy *the pleasures of vice and the honours of virtue*.* Just possessing her isn't enough; I want her to surrender willingly. And to do that, it's not only necessary to get into her house but for her to let me in herself; to find her alone and ready to listen to me; above all to close her eyes to any danger, for if she sees it she'll be able to overcome it or die in the attempt. But the more clearly I can see what's required, the more I realize how difficult it is and at the risk of exciting your hilarity once again I confess that the more I think about it, the more complicated it seems.

But for the pleasant diversions provided by our joint ward, I think I'd feel quite lost: if it wasn't for her, I'd have nothing better to do than write elegiacs.*

Would you believe it, that little girl was so scared that it took three whole days for your letter to take effect? See how one single mistaken idea can warp the most promising disposition!

Anyway, it wasn't until Saturday that the person concerned sidled up to me and stammered a few words, in such a low voice and so smothered in shame that they were impossible to understand. But the red face accompanying them allowed me to guess their meaning. Till then I'd remained on my high horse but mollified by such an amusing act of contrition, I relented and promised to call on the pretty penitent that very night; this gracious gesture of mine was received with all the gratitude appropriate to such a great act of charity.

As I never lose sight of either your plans or mine, I determined, in addition to speeding up her education, to use my opportunity to discover how gifted the child is. However, in order to have greater freedom to achieve this aim, I needed to change our venue because the small closet separating your ward's bedroom from her mother's was hardly calculated to offer her adequate security to display her talents free of any inhibitions. So I'd promised myself to make, quite *innocently*, some noise that would scare her enough to persuade her to find a safer haven for our activities; she herself spared me the trouble.

She's a jolly little girl and to keep her amused during the intervals, I took it into my head to tell her about all the scandalous adventures that came into my mind; and to make them more spicy and more likely to hold her attention, I gave the credit for all of them to her Mummy and took delight in painting a highly colourful picture of her vices and absurdities.

I wasn't doing this just for fun; not only did it arouse my coy young pupil more than anything else but at the same time I was filling her with the deepest contempt for her mother. I've long known that if this method may not always be necessary to seduce a girl, it's the indispensable and often most effective way of depraving her, for a girl without any respect for her mother won't have any self-respect either: a moral truth which I consider so useful that I was delighted to offer practical proof of the principle.

However, your ward had no concern for moral truths and was stifling her giggles all the time until finally she once nearly burst out laughing. I had no difficulty in persuading her that she'd made a *terrible* *din* and pretended to be dreadfully afraid, a

feeling she easily came to share. To make sure she didn't forget, I declined to provide further pleasure and left her three hours earlier than usual, after we'd agreed that in future we would meet in my room.

I've already welcomed her there twice and in this short space of time the schoolgirl has become almost as adept as the teacher. Yes, indeed, I've taught her everything, even the more engaging forms of collaboration. The only thing I left out was how to take precautions.

Being busy all night allows me to have a good long sleep during the day and as the present company in the chateau is madly unexciting, I spend barely an hour in the drawing-room all day. Today I even decided to eat in my room and apart from the odd short walk, I intend to stay there. These vagaries are put down to my health. I've explained that I've been feeling *out of sorts* and also announced that I have a slight temperature. All I need to do is to speak in a slow, far-away tone of voice. As for any change in my face, you can safely leave that to your ward. *Love will provide*.*

I spend my spare time wondering how to regain my lost advantage over my ungrateful judge's wife and also drawing up a sort of catechism of lechery for my pupil's use. I'm enjoying spelling everything out in strictly technical terms and chuckling as I imagine the fascinating conversation which this will provide for her and Gercourt on their wedding night. There's nothing funnier than her ingenious way of using the few words of this sort she already knows! She thinks these are the only expressions. She really is such an attractive little girl! This contrast between her simple innocence and her shameless language manages to produce quite an effect; somehow, I don't really know why, these days I can only enjoy things that are off-beat.*

I may be indulging too much in this one because I'm making excessive demands on my time and my health;* but I'm hoping that my sham illness, apart from rescuing me from that dreary drawing-room, may also be of some use with my saintly puritan who combines tigerish virtue with a tender heart! I've no doubt that she has already been apprised of the great event and I'd very

much like to know what she is making of it, the more so as I bet she won't fail to take credit for it. I shall adjust my state of health to the impression it's making on her.

So now, fair lady, you are as up to date with my affairs as I am myself. I am longing to have more interesting news for you soon and I ask you to believe me when I say that the major part of the pleasure I'm looking forward to is the reward I'm expecting from you.

111

The Comte de Gercourt to Madame de Volanges

Bastia, * 10 October 17—

My dear Madame de Volanges, everything now points to peace in this country and we are anticipating leave to return to France any day. I hope that you have no doubt how eagerly I still look forward to doing so and to forging the links that will bind me to you and to Mademoiselle de Volanges. However, my cousin the Duc de —, to whom, as you are aware, I am under considerable obligation, has just informed me of his recall from Naples. He tells me that he is expecting to pass through Rome and in the course of his journey to visit that part of Italy with which he is still unfamiliar. He has invited me to join him on this excursion, which will last approximately six weeks to two months. I shall not disguise the fact that I should enjoy taking advantage of this opportunity, being fully aware that after my marriage it will be difficult to find time to be away, except as my military duties require. It may thus possibly be more appropriate to wait until the winter to celebrate our nuptials, since all my close relatives, and in particular the Marquis de — whom I have to thank for giving me the privilege of making your acquaintance, will find it impossible to come together in Paris before then. In spite of these major considerations, my plans in this regard are entirely in your hands and should you for any reason prefer to maintain your earlier arrangements, I shall gladly abandon mine. My only request would be that you may let me know your intentions on this matter as soon as possible. I shall await your reply here and will act only in accordance with your wishes.

I remain, dear Madame de Volanges, with the devotion and respect due from your future son, your humble, etc.

The Comte de Gercourt*

112

Madame de Rosemonde to Madame de Tourvel

(dictated and unsigned)

From the Château de —, 14 October 17—

My dear young friend, I have only this very instant received your gently reproachful letter of the 11th.* Admit that you were very tempted to use stronger words and that had you not again recalled that you are now my *daughter*, you would have given me a proper dressing-down! Yet that would have been very unfair of you. It had been my hope and desire to be able to reply to you myself which led me every day to postpone writing to you and you can see that even now I am obliged to employ the services of my maid. My tiresome rheumatism has again attacked me, this time in my right arm, rendering me completely one-armed. See what comes of a fresh young woman like yourself taking such an antique friend! You suffer from her disabilities.

As soon as I am offered a slight relief from my pain, I am most anxious to have a long chat with you. Till such time, let me merely say that I have received both your letters and that I shall always feel the keenest sympathy for everything that concerns you.

My nephew is also slightly indisposed but it is nothing serious and gives not the slightest cause for alarm, a minor ailment which seems to be affecting his moral rather than his physical well-being. We hardly ever see him.

His absence and your departure do nothing to contribute to the gaiety of our little society. The *Volanges* girl in particular has a serious bone to pick with you and sits all day long yawning her head off. She is paying us the compliment, especially during the last few days, of regularly dropping off to sleep after dinner.

Goodbye, dear friend. And as always, I am your friend, your mother, and even your sister, if my great age were to

those who'd only go half-way, as opposed to so many others whose resistance is just provocation and nothing but a poor attempt to cover up the fact that it was they who made the first moves.

Here, on the contrary, was a woman with an initial prejudice against me, later reinforced by the advice and information of a poisonous but perspicacious woman; with an extremely timid nature which strengthened her clear-sighted sense of modesty; a love of virtue based on religion and which had already staunchly survived two years of marriage; finally, as a result of these varying motives, she was deploying a series of most impressive stratagems, all directed towards one goal: evading my pursuit.

So, unlike my previous adventures, this isn't just a more or less expedient capitulation, something to enjoy rather than brag about, it's a crushing victory achieved by a hard-fought campaign and clinched by clever manoeuvres. So it's not surprising that my success, due entirely to my own efforts, should be all the more gratifying and that my extra pleasure at my conquest, which I can still feel, is the sweet taste of a famous victory. I find this thought particularly attractive since it saves me from the humiliating feeling that I might somehow be dependent on the very slave whom I've just subjugated; or that my great happiness lies anywhere but in myself; or that my ability to extract enjoyment out of it is restricted to one particular woman to the exclusion of any other.

At this important juncture, I intend to let my conduct be guided by these sensible conclusions and you may be sure that I shall not allow myself to be so constricted by these new bonds as to be prevented from breaking free, effortlessly, whenever I see fit. But here I am, talking of breaking free and you still don't know how I've come to be in a position to do so. So read on and discover the perils facing a chaste and reasonable woman when she tries to save a wild and foolish man. I kept such careful note of all I said and of her replies that I hope to give you a meticulous verbatim account of both which I'm sure you'll enjoy hearing.*

You'll see from the enclosed copies of two letters* which go between I'd chosen to restore relations with my beloved and with what zeal the holy father set about achieving our reunification. You also need to know something which I'd gleaned from a letter

PART IV

125

The Vicomte de Valmont to the Marquise de Merteuil

Paris, 29 October 17—

Well, fair lady, take a look now at that haughty woman who was rash enough to imagine she could resist me! There she is: I had her yesterday; I've conquered her, she's mine, completely mine, she has granted me everything I want . . .

I'm still too overcome by my good fortune to be able to appreciate it; but I am amazed by the strange charm which I felt. Could it be that a woman's virtue makes her more rewarding to have at the very moment when she's losing it? No, that's puerile nonsense, just another old wives' tale. Don't we almost always meet a more or less faked resistance the first time we have any woman? And haven't I felt the charm I mentioned with other women? Yet it's not the charm of love either, because after all, if I did experience with that astonishing woman a few moments of weakness with some apparent similarity to that anaemic passion, I was always able to overcome them and be true to my principles. Even if during yesterday's events I was, as I believe, carried away rather further than I'd anticipated and for a moment shared the ecstasy and turmoil which I'd aroused, that passing illusion would have evaporated by now. Yet that same charm still lingers on and I confess I should find it rather agreeable to go on enjoying it if it didn't make me feel rather uneasy. Am I going to be overpowered at my age, by an involuntary and unfamiliar emotion, like some schoolboy? Certainly not! I must first of all fight it and analyse it more closely.*

And in any case, I have perhaps already got some dim notion of the reason! At any rate, I like to think so and it would be nice if it's true.

Well, amongst the host of women with whom I've performed the role and function of lover, up till now I'd never had one who wasn't at least as keen to give herself to me as I was to persuade her to do so; I'd even got into the habit of describing as prudish

intercepted in the usual way: namely, that the fear and the minor mortification of being abandoned had somewhat upset the pious young woman's prudishness* and filled her heart and head with feelings and thoughts which, however nonsensical, were still quite intriguing. It was after making these vital preparations that yesterday, Thursday, the 28th, the day already suggested by the ungrateful wench, I presented myself as a timid and penitent slave at the house which I was to leave crowned in the laurels of victory.

It was six o'clock when I arrived at the residence of the lovely recluse—since her return her door had remained closed to everybody. When I was shown in, she made an effort to stand up but her knees were trembling too much for her to remain on her feet and she immediately sat down again. The servant who had shown me in stayed to do a few things in the room and while we exchanged the normal civilities, Madame de Tourvel showed signs of impatience. However, not wishing to waste time when every second counted, I was carefully reconnoitring the terrain and straight away selected the field for a successful operation. I could have chosen a more comfortable one because she even had an ottoman in her room; but I noticed that there was a portrait of her husband hanging opposite and I admit that with such an odd woman a single glance in that direction might destroy in a second the result of all my labours. Finally, the servant left and I launched on my preamble.

After a few words explaining that Father Anselme must have informed her of the reasons for my visit, I protested at the harsh way I had been treated, with particular emphasis on the *contempt* I'd been shown. As I expected, this statement was contested and as you certainly also expect, I justified it by pointing out the suspicion and fear I had inspired; her scandalous ensuing flight; her refusal to answer any of my letters or even to receive them, etc. etc.* As the lady now started to exonerate herself—which was all too easy—I felt it incumbent on me to interrupt and in order to excuse my brusqueness, I immediately glossed it over with flattery. 'Such irresistible charm had made a deep impression on my heart but your virtue had made an equally strong impression on my soul. No doubt carried away by my longing to draw nearer to such a paragon, I was foolhardy enough to im-

agine that I deserved such a privilege. I do not blame you for thinking otherwise but I am punishing myself for my mistake.' As my little piece was followed by an embarrassed silence, I went on: 'Madame de Tourvel, I wanted either to justify myself in your eyes or else receive your pardon for the wrongs you think I've committed, so that I might at least end my days in some sort of peace, since now that you have refused to enrich them, they no longer have any value for me.'

At this point, however, an attempt was made to reply: 'But my duty wouldn't allow me . . .' The difficulty of completing the lie that duty required prevented her from finishing the sentence, so I started again in my most loving voice: 'So it's true that I was the person you were escaping from?' 'It was necessary to leave.' 'And that now you're going away and leaving me?' 'There's no other course.' 'And for ever?' 'I must.' 'I don't need to tell you that during this brief exchange the tender-hearted prude was speaking in a strained voice and not daring to look up. Things were hanging fire and I decided to liven them up. With an offended look I sprang to my feet and said: 'You're very determined but two can play at that game. Very well, Madame, we'll each go our own way and we'll be even further apart than you think. And you will have all the time in the world to feel proud of what you've achieved.' Somewhat taken aback by my accusatory tone, she tried to reply: 'The decision you've taken . . .' she began. 'Was taken through sheer despair,' I retorted heatedly. 'You wanted me to be unhappy and I'll prove to you that you've succeeded beyond your wildest hopes.' 'I want you to be happy,' she replied, in a voice that was beginning to be quite emotional. Thereupon I flung myself at her knees and exclaimed, in that theatrical voice you know so well: 'Oh, how cruel you are! As if there can be any happiness for me if you don't share it! Never! Never!' I confess that having let myself go so energetically, I was relying heavily on tears to help me out but either because I wasn't in the mood or else because my excessive concentration was proving a strain, my tear-ducts failed to respond.

Luckily once again I recalled that to bring a woman to heel anything goes, and that to create a deep and favourable impression I needed only to do something striking to dumbfound her. Since sentiment was not available, I decided to resort to

terror and without changing my position but merely my tone of voice, I continued: 'Yes, here at your feet, I swear that I shall either possess you or die!' As I spoke these last words, our eyes crossed; I don't know what the frightened woman saw or thought she saw in mine but she stood up with a scared look and slipped out of my arms which I had placed round her. It's true that I made no attempt to hold her back because I'd frequently noticed that scenes of despair, when they are too intense and protracted, can become ridiculous or capable of being resolved only by tragic means, which I was very far from wishing to resort to. All the same, as she was slipping out of my arms, I muttered in a sinister voice, but loud enough for her to hear: 'Ah, then the answer is death!'¹⁶*

Then I rose to my feet and stood there silent for a second, casting fierce glances at her, seemingly at random, but although they looked wild, I was observing her closely and carefully. Her body was swaying, her breath coming in gasps, her muscles contracted, her trembling arms half-raised: everything told me well enough that I'd achieved the desired effect; but since in love nothing can be brought to a conclusion except at close quarters and we were quite far apart, it was first necessary to get nearer to each other. To achieve this as quickly as possible, I adopted an attitude of apparent calm likely to allay the effect of my violent outburst but without weakening the impression it had created.

This was my transition: 'I'm very unhappy. I had been intending to devote my life to making you happy and I've made you miserable. I want to give you peace of mind and I am destroying that as well.' Then, as if struggling to remain calm: 'You must forgive me, Madame, I'm not used to the storms and stresses of passion and I am finding it difficult not to be swept away by them. If I was wrong to give way to them, please remember that it was for the last time. Oh, please compose yourself, be calm, I beg you.' In the course of this lengthy pronouncement, I kept stealthily approaching her. 'If you want me to be calm,' replied my frightened beauty, 'you must please calm down yourself.' 'Very well, then, I promise,' I said, adding in a weaker voice: 'It will be a great effort but it won't be for long.' Then I went on, with a frantic look: 'But wasn't my real purpose in coming to

give you back your letters! For pity's sake, please, please take them back. It's one more sacrifice that I still have to make. Don't leave me with anything which may weaken my determination.' And pulling the precious bundle out of my pocket, I said: 'Here they are! Here are the false promises of friendship you placed in my keeping. They gave me something to live for. Take them back and that will be your signal that I must part from you for ever.'

At this the timorous lover gave way completely to her tenderness and anxiety: 'But what is the matter with you, Monsieur de Valmont? What do you mean? Are you not doing this now of your own free will? Isn't it the result of having thought things over which has led you to take this necessary decision, one I have taken myself out of a sense of duty?' 'Well,' I replied, 'it was your decision that led to mine!' 'And what is your decision?' 'The only one possible for me, to put an end to my suffering now that I have to part from you.' 'But you must answer my question: what have you decided?' Thereupon I clasped her in my arms while she offered not the slightest resistance. Realizing how overpowering her emotion must be to lead her so to forget her sense of propriety, I said: 'Oh, how adorable you are!' (I thought it worth while to risk a little enthusiasm) 'you have no idea of the love you have inspired, you never realized how I worshipped you and how much stronger that love was than my love of life! May peace and happiness go with you for the rest of your days! And may they be enriched by all the happiness you have stolen from me! Won't you at least reward this sincere wish of mine with a tear or a regret? And you may be sure that this last sacrifice of mine will not be the one my heart finds most painful. Farewell!'

As I said this, I could feel her heart pounding, I noticed her contorted features, and I could see that her tears, though flowing slowly and painfully, were choking her. It was only now that I made a pretence of moving away from her but she clung hard on to me and said abruptly: 'No, listen to me!' 'Let me go!' I retorted. 'I insist that you listen to me!' 'I've got to leave you, I must!' 'No!' she cried. As she said this, she flung herself or rather collapsed fainting in my arms. Being still not quite sure of a successful outcome, I pretended to be greatly alarmed; but in the

course of my alarm, I steered her or rather carried her over to the place I'd earlier selected as the field of my triumph;* and in fact when she came to, her capitulation was complete: she had already succumbed to her gratified conqueror.

Till now, fair lady, you will have recognized and appreciated the classic purity of my methods and seen how scrupulously I adhere to the essential principles of this sort of warfare which, as we've often acknowledged, is extremely similar to the real thing. So look upon me as a Turenne or a Frederick.* I'd forced an enemy who was using delaying tactics to join battle; by clever manoeuvring, I had chosen the ground and the battle order; I had lulled the enemy into a sense of security so as to penetrate more easily into her defences; before launching my attack, security had been replaced by terror; I had left nothing to chance since, while aware that success would bring me indubitable advantages, if repulsed I had other resources ready; and finally, I went into action knowing that my retreat was covered and I would lose none of my earlier gains. I don't think anyone can do better than that; but now I'm afraid that like Hannibal surrounded by the luxuries of Capua,* I have grown effete. This is what happened.

I was of course prepared for the despair and tears normally attending such major events; and the first thing I noticed was slightly increased confusion and a sort of inner withdrawal, which I attributed to a prudish nature, and so without paying further attention to these variations which I imagined to be purely local, I simply pursued my course along the main avenue of consolation, convinced that, as usual, the senses would come to the help of sentiments and that a single action would speak louder than any words, although I didn't neglect those either. But I met a resistance truly terrifying, not so much for its extravagance as for the form it took.

Picture to yourself a woman sitting rigidly still, with set, frozen features, apparently neither thinking, listening, nor hearing anything, from whose wide, staring eyes tears were pouring almost without pause and without effort. This was how Madame de Tourvel looked while I was speaking to her; but each time I endeavoured to attract her attention by a caress, by even the most innocent gesture, this apparent apathy was immediately replaced

by a look of terror, gasps, convulsions, sobs, and occasionally by completely inarticulate cries.

These spasms recurred a number of times, each time more violently; the last one was even so violent that I completely lost heart and for a moment I feared I'd achieved a hollow victory. I fell back on the usual platitudes, one of which happened to be this one: 'And so you're in despair because you've made me a happy man?' At these words, the adorable woman turned towards me and though still looking haggard, her face had already recovered its heavenly expression. 'Happy?' she said. You can guess my reply. 'So I've made you happy?' I repeated my assurances. 'And happy through me?' I provided the additional compliments and words of love. While I was talking, her whole body relaxed and she sank gently back into her armchair, even letting me take her hand. She murmured: 'I feel relieved and comforted by that thought.'

You'll understand that once launched on that course, I took good care not to leave it: it was certainly the correct and perhaps even the only one. Indeed, when I tried to repeat my first successful attempt, I met with some initial resistance and my previous experience was making me wary. But when I again appealed to that same idea of my happiness to help me, I soon felt the beneficial effects. 'You are right,' said the tender-hearted woman; 'I can bear to go on living now only as long as it serves to make you happy; from now on I shall devote myself entirely to that, I shall give myself to you and you will never hear any regrets or meet any refusal from me again.' And so, with an innocence which was either naive or sublime, she abandoned herself to me in all her beauty, sharing my pleasure until it ended in simultaneous ecstasy. And for the first time, mine outlasted my pleasure. I left her arms only to fall at her feet and swear eternal love.* I don't wish to hide anything: I meant what I said. Indeed, even after we'd parted, I kept thinking of her and had to make a great effort to put her out of my mind.

Ah, why aren't you here to match my glorious action by an at least equivalent reward? But I shan't lose anything by waiting, shall I? And I hope that I can assume your agreement with the happy arrangement which I suggested to you in my last letter. As you see, I'm fulfilling my obligations and, as I promised, I shall

be sufficiently far advanced in my business to be able to give you part of my time. So do hurry up, send the ponderous Belleruche packing and leave the sappy Danceny, so that you can devote yourself entirely to me. What on earth are you up to down there in the country, not even answering my letters? Do you know that I've a good mind to give you a thorough telling-off! But happiness makes us forbearing. And in any case I'm not forgetting that by rejoining the ranks of your admirers I have once again to submit to your little vagaries. But do remember that the new lover doesn't want to lose any of his long-standing rights as a friend.

Goodbye, as in the good old days. *Yes, goodbye, my angel! With all my loving kisses!**

PS Do you know that at the end of his month in gaol, Prévan has been forced to resign from his regiment? It's the talk of the town today. He really has been cruelly punished for a wrong he didn't commit! Your triumph is complete!*

126

Madame de Rosemonde to Madame de Tourvel

From the Château de —, 30 October 17—

I should have answered you earlier, dear girl, if writing my last letter hadn't brought on my aches and pains and denied me the use of my arm these last few days. I was anxious to thank you for the good news you gave me of my nephew and not less so to offer you my sincere congratulations on your own behalf. In this matter we are truly forced to recognize the hand of Providence which by blessing one of you has also offered salvation to the other. Yes, dear child, He who wished merely to put you to the test has lent His aid at the moment when your strength was exhausted and, despite your slight misgivings, you owe him, I think, some measure of thanksgiving. Not that I fail to recognize that it would have been more agreeable for you to have made this decision first and for Valmont's to have followed as a result. Humanly speaking, it seems that the claims of our sex would have benefited thereby and we don't wish to forgo any of those! But what are these minor considerations compared to the im-

portant objects that have been achieved? Does someone rescued from shipwreck ever complain about not having been consulted as to the way he was saved?

You'll soon find, my dear daughter, that the sufferings you dread will start to cure themselves and even should they continue to persist in all their virulence, you'll still feel that they would be easier to bear than self-contempt and remorse for your crime. To have addressed you in this seemingly harsh tone earlier would have been pointless: love is an independent spirit; being cautious may help us to avoid it but can never enable us to overcome it; once it's born, it can only die of natural causes or complete hopelessness. The latter is what has happened to you and gives me the chance and the courage to give you my honest opinion. It's cruel to scare people who are mortally ill; they need soothing and comforting; but it's sensible to inform a convalescent of the risks he's been running in order to make him understand how wary he must be and of his need to accept advice which may still prove necessary.

Since you've appointed me your doctor, I'm talking to you like one and I can assure you that the minor pains you're suffering at the moment are nothing compared to the dire disease you've just recovered from. And speaking now as a friend, the friend of a sensible, virtuous woman, I shall take the liberty of adding that this passion which you've overcome, however unfortunate in itself, was becoming even more so because of its object. If I am to believe what I am told, my nephew, whom I admit to loving—perhaps to the point of weakness—and who has indeed a great number of admirable as well as many charming qualities, is neither harmless nor blameless in his relations with women; he's almost equally interested in seducing and in ruining them. I feel sure that you would have reformed him;* there was certainly never anyone more qualified to undertake that task; but so many women who have nursed that fond hope have been disappointed that I am far happier for your sake that you've not been reduced to that resort.

But now, dear friend, you must reflect that instead of all the dangers you were incurring, you will enjoy not only a clear conscience and peace of mind but the gratifying feeling of having been the main agent of Valmont's contrition. As for me, I have no

uniquely centred on our beloved. A man enjoys the pleasure he feels, a woman the pleasure she bestows. This difference, so essential and so unnoticed, has however a very marked effect on their respective general behaviour. The pleasure of one partner is to satisfy his desires, that of the other is primarily to arouse them. For the man, pleasing is merely a means to succeed whereas for her it is success itself. And feminine flirtatiousness, for which she is so often blamed, is nothing but an abuse of this way of feeling and for that very reason proves it is true. And so this exclusive fondness for someone, which is a particular characteristic of love, remains, for a man, purely a preference which is, at the most, useful for him to assess the extent of his pleasure and which some other affection might weaken but not destroy, whereas for women it's a deep emotion which not only abolishes all desire for anyone else but, being more powerful than nature and outside its control, causes them to feel nothing but repugnance and disgust even in situations which ought apparently to provide them with extreme pleasure.

It is easy to quote numbers of exceptions to these general principles but you mustn't think that they invalidate their truth! They have the support of public opinion which has drawn a distinction—for men only—between being unfaithful and being inconstant; it's one they are delighted to take advantage of, instead of considering it disgraceful, as they ought; but it's one that has never been accepted except by depraved women who are themselves a disgrace to their sex and who'll clutch at any straw to avoid having to face the unpleasant reality of their own ignominy.

I thought, dear friend, that it might help you to hear my reflections and compare them with those illusions of perfect bliss in love that we never cease to dream about; false hopes which we still try to cling to even when we're forced to abandon them; and whose loss aggravates and increases the strains and stresses, already only too real, inherent in any intensely passionate love! This attempt to calm or reduce your sufferings is the only one I want or am able to make at the moment. When ills are incurable, advice can only hope to try to alleviate them. All I ask you to remember is that feeling pity for someone who's ill doesn't mean blaming them. Who are we to cast the first stone? Let us leave the

right to judge to Him who alone can read in all our hearts; and I venture to think that in our Father's eyes, a single weakness can be redeemed by a host of virtues.

But I do beseech you, dear, dear girl, above all to resist those violent resolutions which indicate not so much that you are strong but that you are utterly dejected. Aren't you forgetting, that if, in your own words, your existence belongs to someone else, none the less you may not deprive your friends of that part of your life which they already had and which they will never agree to give up.

Goodbye, my dear, dear daughter. Think sometimes of your loving mother and never doubt that you will always be first and foremost in her thoughts and her affection.

131

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont
From the Château de —, 6 November 17—

Bravo, Vicomte! You get much better marks this time than last. But now let's settle down to a friendly chat and I hope to convince you that the arrangement you seem to want would be madness for both of us.

Haven't you yet realized that pleasure, which is indeed certainly the one and only reason for the two sexes to come together, is nevertheless not enough to establish a relationship between them? And that though this pleasure is preceded by desire which draws people together, it is however followed by aversion which pushes them apart? It's a law of nature which only love can change. Can we feel love whenever we want? Yet love is always needed, which would be a dreadfully tiresome thing if it hadn't fortunately been realized that it's enough for just one of the partners to feel it, thereby halving the problem, and without even incurring any great loss; in fact, one party is happy to love, the other to please, which is actually a bit less exciting but which can be combined with the pleasure of deceiving and that even things out, so everyone's happy.

But tell me, Vicomte, which of us two will undertake to deceive the other? You know the story of the two card-sharppers who

spotted each other when they were playing together: we're not going to get anything from each other, they said, let's split the proceeds, and they stopped playing. Believe me, let's follow this wise example and not waste our time together when we can spend it so profitably elsewhere.

To prove to you that my decision is prompted as much by your interests as my own and that I'm not acting out of malice or caprice, I shan't withhold the reward we agreed on: anyway, I feel that for a single evening we'll hit it off together fabulously; I even have no doubt that we can embroider on it sufficiently well to make us sorry when it comes to an end. But don't forget that this regret is necessary for happiness; and that however pleasant the illusion, let's not imagine that it can last.

You will see that I too am fulfilling my obligations—and before you've yet settled up with me; after all, I was to be given the heavenly prude's first letter, yet either because you're reluctant to part with it or else because you've forgotten the terms of our bargain (which maybe you find less interesting than you want me to believe), I've received nothing, nothing whatsoever. Nevertheless, unless I'm very much mistaken, your tender-hearted and pious conquest must be a great letter-writer. What else could she do when she's alone? She's certainly not sensible enough to look around for amusement. So I have a small bone to pick with you, if I have a mind to: but I'll hold my peace on the subject, to make amends for the slightly acrimonious tone I allowed to creep into my last letter.

Now, Vicomte, the only thing left for me to do is to make a request, as much for your sake as mine: it is to postpone an event which I am perhaps looking forward to as much as you but which it seems to me must be held over until I come back to town. For one thing, we wouldn't find the requisite freedom here; for another, I'd be running a certain amount of risk because a little touch of jealousy is all that's required for that dreary fellow Belleruche to grow more attached to me again than ever, even though he's on his last legs. As it is, he's making such desperate efforts to love me that at times I'm continuing to smother him with caresses as much out of mischief as of prudence. But all the same, as you can see, it could hardly be described as making a sacrifice for you! Being unfaithful to each other will add a lot more spice to a charming occasion.

Do you know, I'm sometimes sorry that we've been reduced to these expedients? In the old days, when we loved one another—for I think it was love—I was happy. How about you, Vicomte? But why concern ourselves with a happiness that can never return? No, whatever you may say, it's not possible to turn the clock back. First of all, I'd demand sacrifices from you which you'd be unable or unwilling to accept and which I may not even deserve. And then, how could I hold on to you? No, I don't want such a thought even to come into my head and although at this moment I'm enjoying writing to you, I'd better break off quickly now. . . . Goodbye, Vicomte.

132

Madame de Tourvel to Madame de Rosemonde

Paris, 7 November 17—

I am overwhelmed by your kindness, Madame, and the only thing which somehow holds me back from throwing myself on that kindness is fear of profaning it. At a time when your help is so precious, why do I feel so unworthy of it? Ah, at least I shall not be afraid to show how grateful I am for it and, above all, how greatly I admire the way in which a virtuous woman can forgive and feel only sympathy for the weaknesses she perceives; who can cast such a powerful spell over our hearts with a strong yet gentle authority which prevails even over the spell of love.

But am I still worthy of your friendship now that it no longer has any power to make me happy? And I feel the same with regard to your advice: I value it yet I cannot follow it. And how could I fail to believe in perfect happiness when I am enjoying it at this very moment? Yes, indeed, if men are like you say, they must be shunned, they are odious; but if that is the case, how different from them Valmont is! If like them he feels that impetuosity of passion which you describe as 'being carried away', how he manages to transcend it by his exquisite delicacy of feeling! Dear friend, you talk of sharing my sorrows; why don't you enjoy the happiness my love is bringing me and which is all the more rewarding because of its object? You say you are fond of your nephew, perhaps to the point of weakness? Ah, if you only knew him as well as I do! I idolize him but far less than he