

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

THE READER'S COMPANION EDITION

Dangerous Liaisons

Les Liaisons dangereuses

CHODERLOS DE LACLOS

Translated by Richard Aldington

BOOKHAWK PRESS

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This sample contains the opening of the book. It is not for sale.

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Introduction

THE SOLDIER WHO WROTE A SCANDAL

Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos was born in Amiens, in northern France, in 1741. He came from a family of minor nobility, and like many young men of his class who needed a profession, he went into the army. He chose the artillery, the most technical branch of the service, where promotion depended more on mathematics than on family connections. For some twenty years he moved from one garrison town to another. His career was steady rather than glorious. Much of it was spent in peacetime postings, which gave a sharp-eyed officer a great deal of time to read, write light verse, and watch how people in provincial society flirted, gossiped, schemed, and covered their tracks.

In his late thirties Laclos was sent to the Atlantic coast to work on fortifications on the Île d'Aix, and it was in these years that he wrote the novel that made his name. *Les Liaisons dangereuses* was published in Paris in the spring of 1782. It was an immediate sensation. The first printing sold quickly, and new editions followed. Readers in Paris society amused themselves by guessing which real men and women might have served as models for its characters. Many were shocked; almost everyone read it. The book did nothing to help the army career of an officer who was now famous for having imagined, in vivid and unembarrassed detail, how a pair of aristocrats might go about destroying other people for sport.

His later life took him into politics and back to war. He married Marie-Soulange Duperré, and the letters he wrote to her over the years show a tender, devoted husband, which surprises readers who expect the author of this book to resemble his most notorious character. He also wrote essays on the education of women, arguing that women were shaped by the society that

confined them. On the eve of the Revolution he became secretary to the Duc d'Orléans, a cousin of the king, and he was drawn deep into revolutionary politics. He was imprisoned during the Terror and was lucky to survive it. Under Napoleon Bonaparte he returned to the army and was made a general of artillery. He died in 1803 at Taranto, in southern Italy, still in uniform. He never wrote another novel.

LETTERS AS WEAPONS

The story begins simply enough. A girl of fifteen leaves her convent school to be married to a man she has never met. A virtuous young wife spends the summer in the country while her husband is away in Burgundy on a lawsuit. These are ordinary situations. What makes them dangerous is that two brilliant, bored, and entirely unscrupulous people have decided to take an interest in them.

The Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont are aristocrats, former lovers, and now something closer to partners in crime. They write to each other as equals, with teasing affection, rivalry, and a shared contempt for everyone else. Seduction, for them, is not romance but a campaign: they speak of attacks, defenses, victories, and surrenders, and it is worth remembering that the man who wrote their letters was a professional soldier who knew exactly how a siege was planned. Valmont is the famous seducer, charming and self-regarding. Merteuil is something rarer. In public she is admired and trusted; other characters hold her up as a model of good sense. In private, writing to Valmont, she reveals a mind of startling clarity and control. She plans. She rehearses. She has a rule that a compromising note never goes out in her own handwriting. Many readers come to think she is the most intelligent person in the book, and she is certainly the one who seems to be thinking several moves ahead of everyone else.

In this novel, a letter is never just a letter. Each one is written to make its reader feel something, believe something, or do something. A letter can flatter, soothe, warn, or wound. It can be written in someone else's hand, carried secretly by a go-between, or composed with one eye on someone other than the person it is addressed to. Laclos understood that the written word, which seems so private and sincere, is one of the easiest things in the world to fake. Nearly everyone here is performing for someone, and the more innocent a character is, the less they realize that the people they trust are performing too.

The most uncomfortable discovery is that the reader is not innocent either. We are reading other people's private mail. We know more than any single

character does, because we see what Valmont tells Merteuil and also what his intended victim writes to her friend. We laugh at the wit of the two schemers, and we find ourselves wanting to know whether their plots will work. The book quietly makes us accomplices. The solemn Editor's Preface insists that the letters are published to teach good morals, and you may decide for yourself how seriously to take that claim. Reputations, marriages, and hearts are all at risk here, and the ending is one of the most famous in French literature; part of the pleasure is noticing how much you are enjoying the journey there.

HOW TO READ A NOVEL IN LETTERS

If you have never read a novel told entirely in letters, a few habits will make it much more enjoyable.

First, always check the heading. Each letter tells you who is writing and to whom, and that is the most important information on the page. Valmont writing to Merteuil sounds nothing like Valmont as described by the woman he is pursuing. The same summer afternoon can be told three different ways by three different people, and the gaps between their versions are where the story lives.

Second, ask what each writer is hiding, and from whom. Young Cécile hides almost nothing, because she hardly knows there is anything to hide. The virtuous Madame de Tourvel is honest, but she may not fully understand her own feelings. Merteuil and Valmont are frank with each other, or seem to be, but even their letters are full of boasting, testing, and point-scoring. A useful question is always: what does this writer want the reader of this letter to believe?

Third, look at the dates, which in this edition appear at the end of each letter. The year is always blanked out as "17—," a period convention that pretends to protect real people. The days matter a great deal. They tell you how fast events are moving, which letters are answers to which, and when two people are writing about the same moment. The Editor's Preface says the letters are arranged in an order that is "almost always" that of their dates, and the word "almost" is worth taking seriously; now and then a letter appears slightly out of sequence, and it pays to notice when.

Fourth, pay attention to the footnotes. Notes marked "C. de L." belong to Laclos himself, speaking in the voice of the fictional editor who claims to have gathered this correspondence. They explain what has been cut, supply background, and sometimes add a sly comment of their own. Laclos also tells us that many letters have been left out, including every reply from Cécile's

friend Sophie, so we hear only one side of certain conversations. Most of the unmarked notes are the translator's.

Finally, listen to the voices. Cécile's letters are breathless and full of exclamation marks. Madame de Tourvel writes with careful, courteous formality. Madame de Volanges sounds like the worried, well-meaning mother she is. Merteuil's letters sparkle and cut. One of Laclos's great achievements is that each writer sounds distinctly like a person, and some readers find the book comes most alive when they imagine each letter being read aloud by its author.

THIS TRANSLATION, AND THE BOOK'S AFTERLIFE

The English translation in this edition is by Richard Aldington, first published in 1924 under the title *Dangerous Acquaintances*. Aldington was an English poet and novelist, associated in his youth with the Imagist poets and a veteran of the First World War. His version is lively and readable, and it keeps a few French words, such as *rouerie* and *mémoires*, where the flavor of the original mattered to him. He explains in a note that he calls the heroine "Madame de Tourvel" rather than using her French title of "Présidente," which has no English equivalent. The glossary in this edition explains titles, customs, and terms that may be unfamiliar.

The book has never stopped finding new readers. Christopher Hampton adapted it into a celebrated stage play in 1985, and his screenplay became the 1988 film *Dangerous Liaisons*, which made that English title familiar to millions. Roger Vadim had already set the story in modern France in a 1959 film; Miloš Forman made his own version, *Valmont*; and *Cruel Intentions* moved the plot to an American prep school. The best way to meet the letters, though, is the way readers in 1782 did: one at a time, not knowing what comes next.

A Note on the Text

This edition reprints Richard Aldington's English translation, first published in 1924 by George Routledge & Sons, London, and E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, as *Dangerous Acquaintances*. It was transcribed from that printing and proofread against the page.

Spelling, punctuation and wording follow the 1924 text. Quotation marks, spacing and dashes have been brought into line with modern typography, and footnotes are numbered afresh in each letter. Notes signed "C. de L." are Laclos's own; unsigned notes are the translator's.

Obvious printer's errors have been corrected: "Believe, me, Vicomte" to "Believe me, Vicomte" (p. 73); "Indeed. although" to "Indeed, although" (p. 84); "inconsistancy" to "inconsistency" (p. 86).

The introduction, the notes that open each letter, the list of characters and the glossary are new to this edition.

The Correspondents and Their Circle

The Marquise de Merteuil. A widow of Paris society, respected by her friends and related to Madame de Volanges, who privately plots with her former lover Valmont. Witty, commanding, and coldly strategic, she wants revenge on the Comte de Gercourt, who once left her for another woman.

The Vicomte de Valmont. A notorious seducer and Merteuil's former lover, now staying at his elderly aunt's château. He has set himself the challenge of conquering the famously virtuous Madame de Tourvel, while posing as a man who might be reformed.

Madame de Tourvel. A devout, sincere young wife of twenty-two, married nearly two years, spending the summer with Madame de Rosemonde while her husband is away. She believes Valmont is better than his reputation and hopes to help him mend his ways.

Cécile Volanges. A fifteen-year-old girl just home from her convent school, who knows she is to be married but not to whom. Innocent and eager, she writes everything to her school friend Sophie and has grown very fond of her new singing partner, the Chevalier Danceny.

Madame de Volanges. Cécile's mother, who arranged Madame de Tourvel's marriage and is now arranging her daughter's. She knows Valmont's reputation well and warns her young friend against him, while trusting Merteuil completely.

The Chevalier Danceny. A young Knight of Malta who sings and composes music, and who comes every day to sing with Cécile. According to Merteuil he is madly in love with her.

Madame de Rosemonde. Valmont's aunt, eighty-eight years old but sharp and good-humored, at whose country château Valmont and Madame de Tourvel are both staying. Her property is to pass to Valmont.

The Comte de Gercourt. The man chosen as Cécile's husband, whom she has not yet met; he prizes convent-bred, fair-haired brides. He once abandoned Merteuil for another woman, and his army duties have now postponed the wedding until winter.

Sophie Carnay. Cécile's closest friend, still a pupil at the Ursuline convent. Cécile writes to her constantly, but none of Sophie's replies are included in the collection.

The Chevalier (Merteuil's lover). Merteuil's current lover, unnamed in these letters, whom she reminds Valmont is his sworn friend. She considers dropping him, then instead treats him to an elaborate secret night.

Victoire. Merteuil's trusted maid and accomplice, who writes her mistress's secret notes and disguises herself as a lackey when required.

Monsieur de Tourvel. Madame de Tourvel's husband, a magistrate, who is away in Burgundy on account of an important lawsuit.

The Intendante de ——. A woman from the past who gave up Valmont for Gercourt, the affair that first brought Merteuil and Valmont together.

Josephine. An attendant at Cécile's convent who works the turning-box and carries letters between Cécile and Sophie.

Mother Perpetue. A nun at the convent who used to scold Cécile.

Tanville. A haughty fellow pupil from Cécile's convent whom Cécile looks forward to impressing with her new clothes.

Dangerous Liaisons

Letters collected in a private society and published for the instruction of others

Publisher's Note

The Public is notified that despite the title of this work and what is said by the editor in his preface, we do not guarantee the authenticity of the collection and we have good reason to believe it is only a Novel.¹

Moreover we think that the author, in seeking verisimilitude, has himself destroyed it in a very clumsy way, by the period in which he has placed the events he makes public. Indeed, several of the characters he describes have such abominable morals that it is impossible to suppose they could have lived in our own century—that century of philosophy in which enlightenment, spreading on all sides, has rendered (as everyone knows) all men so worthy and all women so modest and reserved.

Our opinion therefore is that if the events recorded in this work have a basis of truth they can only have happened in other countries or in other times; and we greatly blame the author who, apparently seduced by the hope of being more interesting by coming nearer his age and country, has dared to display, in our dress and with our customs, morals which are so foreign to us.

To preserve as far as we can the too credulous reader from any mistake in the matter, we support our opinion by a line of reasoning which we put forward with confidence, because it appears to us triumphant and unanswerable; it is that the same causes could not fail to produce the same effects, and that to-day we never see a young Lady, with an income of sixty thousand livres, become a nun, nor the wife of a *Président*² die of grief while she is still young and pretty.

¹1782. An ironic comment by Laclos himself.

²"*Présidente*." A *Président* was an important magistrate; his wife had the title of "*Présidente*." Throughout this translation "*La Présidente de Tourvel*" will appear as "*Madame de Tourvel*," since there is no English equivalent to the title of "*Présidente*."

Editor's Preface

This work, or rather this collection, which the public may perhaps think too voluminous, only contains a very small number of the letters composing the whole correspondence from which it is taken. When I was requested to put in order this correspondence by those into whose hands it had fallen and whose purpose I knew was to make it public, I asked no compensation for my pains beyond the permission to cut out everything which might appear to me unnecessary, and I have tried to preserve only those letters which seemed to me needed for the understanding of events or to reveal character. If to this slight task is added that of rearranging the letters I have preserved in an order which is almost always that of their dates, and a few short notes whose purpose as a rule is merely to point out the origin of quotations or to explain some of the omissions; the whole of my share in this work will be known. My task went no further.¹

I had proposed more considerable changes, almost all relating to the purity of diction or style, which will be found very faulty. I had also desired authority to cut down certain letters which are too long, several of which treat separately, and with practically no continuity, of matters that have no connection with each other. This labour, which was not accepted, would certainly have been insufficient to make the work valuable but would at least have freed it from some of its defects.

It was pointed out to me that the intention was to publish the letters and not a work founded upon the letters; that it would be as contrary to probability as to truth for the eight or ten people who took part in the correspondence

¹I must also give notice that I have suppressed or changed all the names of persons mentioned in these letters; and that if among those which I have substituted there should be a name belonging to somebody this will be no more than an error on my part from which no conclusion should be drawn. (C. de L.)

to have written with the same purity. And when I pointed out that far from this being the case, there was none among them guiltless of serious mistakes which could not fail to be censured, I was told that every reasonable reader would naturally expect to find mistakes in a collection of letters by a few private persons since in all those hitherto published by different authors of eminence (and even by certain Academicians), there was not one wholly free from this reproach. These reasons did not convince me and I thought them, as I still think, easier to give than to accept; but I had no authority and was forced to give way. But I reserved the right to protest against the decision and to state that I was of a different opinion; which I now do.

As to any merit which this work may have, perhaps it is not for me to give an opinion, since it ought not and cannot influence anyone's. However, those who like to know what they are to expect before they begin to read a book, may continue to read this preface; others will do better to turn straight to the work itself; they know enough about it.

What I have to say at first is, that although my advice was, as I have admitted, to publish these letters, I am far from hoping they will be successful. But do not take this sincerity on my part for the affected modesty of an author; for I declare with the same frankness that if this collection had not seemed to me worth offering to the public I should not have troubled with it. Let us try to reconcile this apparent contradiction.

The merit of a work consists in its utility or the pleasure it gives, and sometimes in both when that is possible; but success (which is not always a proof of merit) often arises rather from the choice of a subject than from its execution, from the aggregate of objects presented rather than from the manner in which they are treated. Now this collection includes, as its title indicates, the letters of a whole group, and this causes a diversity of interest which weakens that of the reader. Moreover, since almost all the sentiments here expressed are feigned or dissimulated they can only arouse the interest of curiosity which is always far below the interest of sentiment, which excites less indulgence and allows faults of detail to be more easily perceived, because these details are continually opposed to the one desire for which satisfaction is wished.

These defects are perhaps partly atoned for by a quality which lies in the very nature of the work; that is, variety of styles, a merit which an author attains with difficulty but which here arises spontaneously, and at least preserves from the boredom of uniformity. Some persons may count as a merit the considerable number of observations, either new or little known, which

are scattered through these letters. That, I think, is all the pleasure that can be hoped for from them, even when they are judged with the greatest indulgence.

The utility of the work will perhaps be more contested but seems to me easier to establish. To me at least, it appears a service rendered to good morals to unmask the methods employed by those whose morals are bad, in corrupting others who are good, and I think that these letters effectively contribute to that end. There will also be found the proof and example of two important truths which might be thought unknown, seeing how little they are regarded; one is that every woman who consents to receive into her society an immoral man ends by becoming his victim; the other is that every mother who allows someone else to possess her daughter's confidence is at least imprudent. Young people of either sex may also learn here that the friendship which seems to be granted them with such facility by persons of bad morals is never anything but a dangerous snare, as fatal to their happiness as to their virtue. Yet abuse, which is always so near to what is good, seems to me particularly to be dreaded here; and, far from advising this book to youth, I think it very important to deprive the young of all books of this kind. The period when it may cease to be dangerous and become useful appears to me to have been grasped—for persons of her own sex—by a good mother who not only possesses intelligence but a *good* intelligence. "I think," she said to me, after she had read the manuscript of this correspondence, "I should be rendering a real service to my daughter by giving her this book on her wedding-day." If all mothers of families are of a similar opinion I shall always congratulate myself upon the publication of this work. But even arguing from this favourable supposition it still seems to me that this collection can please but a few. Depraved men and women will find it to their interest to decry a work which may harm them; and since they are not lacking in skill, they may be clever enough to attach the rigourists to their party through their alarm at the picture of evil morals here presented.

Those who pretend to irreligion will take no interest in a female devotee because that very fact will make them look upon her as a foolish little woman, and at the same time the devotees will be angry that virtue succumbs and will complain that religion is represented as having too little power.

On the other hand, persons of a delicate taste will be disgusted by the over-simple and faulty style of several of these letters, while the bulk of readers who are convinced that everything they see printed is the fruit of long labour will think they see in other letters the laboured manner of an author showing himself beneath the personage through whose mouth he speaks.

Finally, the general opinion will perhaps be that each thing is of use only in its place and that if, as a rule, the over-careful style of authors deprives familiar letters of the effects of grace, the negligences in real familiar letters become serious faults and make them unendurable when they are printed.

I frankly admit that all these objections seem to me to be founded; I also think I could reply to them, and that without exceeding the length of a preface. But it will be felt that the necessity of replying to everything would mean that the book responded to nothing; and that, if I had thought this, I should have suppressed both preface and book.

Part I

LETTER I

Cécile Volanges to Sophie Carnay at the Ursuline Convent of...

READER'S NOTE The novel opens with a girl's voice. Cécile Volanges, fifteen and just home from her convent school, writes to her best friend Sophie, who is still there. She wants Sophie to share her excitement: new clothes, a maid, a writing-table with its own key. She has a great deal and is told very little. Everyone seems to be preparing for her marriage, yet nobody will say whom she is to marry. The shoemaker episode is comic, but it shows how unready she is for the world. The dateline, Paris, 3rd August, starts the clock: from here the story moves almost day by day.

You will see, my dear, that I have kept my word and that bonnets and pom-poms do not take up all my time—there will always be some left over for you. Yet I have seen more clothes in this single day than in the four years we spent together; and I think the haughty Tanville¹ will be more angered by my first visit (when I intend to ask for her), than she thought we were when she came to see us *in fiocchi*.² Mamma asks my opinion in everything and treats me much less like a school-girl than she used to do. I have my own maid; I have a room and a study at my disposal and I am writing this to you at a very pretty writing-table whose key was given to me so that I can shut up anything I want in it. Mamma says I am to see her every day when she gets up; that I need not arrange my hair³ until dinner time because we shall always be alone, and that she will tell me every day when I am to join her in the afternoon. The rest of my time is at my disposal and I have my harp, my drawing and my books just

¹Pupil in the same convent. (C. de L.).

²In her best clothes.

³This refers to the elaborate head-dress of the 18th century lady.

as in the convent, except that Mother Perpetue is not here to scold me and that I need do nothing unless I wish; but since my Sophie is not here to talk and laugh with me, I may just as well occupy myself.

It is not yet five o'clock; I do not see Mamma until seven; plenty of time, if I had anything to say to you! but so far nothing has been said and except for the preparations I see being made and the numbers of sewing-women who all come for me I should think there is no intention of marrying me and that it was one more delusion on the part of the good Josephine.⁴ Yet Mamma has told me so often that a young lady should remain at the convent until she is married that Josephine must be right, since Mamma has taken me away.

A carriage has just stopped at the door and Mamma sends me a message to come to her at once. Suppose it were *he*? I am not dressed; my hand trembles and my heart beats. I asked my maid if she knew who was with my mother. "Why," said she, "it is M. C..." And she laughed. Oh! I think it *is* he! I shall surely return to tell you what has happened. This, at all events, is his name. I must not keep them waiting. Adieu, for a moment...

How you will laugh at your poor Cécile! Oh! I was very much ashamed, but you would have been as helpless as I was. When I entered Mamma's room I saw a gentleman in black standing beside her. I saluted him as well as I could and remained rooted to the spot. You can imagine how I looked at him! "Madame," said he to my mother, as he bowed to me, "This is a charming young lady and I feel more than ever the value of your favour." At this plain remark I began to tremble, to such an extent that I could not stand up; I found an arm-chair and sat down in it, blushing deeply and very disconcerted. I had scarcely sat down when this man was at my knees! Your poor Cécile then lost her head; as Mamma said, I was thoroughly scared. I sprang up with a piercing cry... just like the day of the thunder-storm. Mamma burst out laughing and said: "Why! What is the matter with you? Sit down and give Monsieur your foot." My dear, "Monsieur" was a shoemaker! I cannot tell you how ashamed I was; fortunately no one was there but Mamma. I think that when I am married I shall never employ this shoemaker.

You must admit we are well informed! Good-bye. It is nearly six o'clock and my maid says I must dress. Good-bye, dear Sophie; I love you as if I were still at the convent.

⁴Attendant at the convent turning-box. (C. de L.).

P.S. I do not know by whom to send this letter, so I shall wait until Josephine comes.

Paris, 3rd August, 17—.

LETTER II

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont at the Château de...

READER'S NOTE Here is the voice of the other Paris. The Marquise de Merteuil summons Valmont back from his aunt's house with a mixture of flirtation and command. Her plan: Cécile is to marry the Comte de Gercourt, who once jilted Merteuil, so Valmont should seduce the girl before the wedding and make Gercourt the laughingstock of Paris. Laclos's footnote explains the old tangle of lovers behind her grudge. Her tone is teasing and affectionate toward Valmont, and utterly cold about Cécile. She has also arranged a supper with Cécile and her mother for the next evening.

Come back, my dear Vicomte, come back; what are you doing, what *can* you be doing with an old aunt whose property is entailed on you? Come at once; I need you. I have a wonderful idea and you must carry it out. These few words should be enough for you and, but too honoured by my choice, you should come eagerly to take my orders on your knees; but you abuse my favours even since you have ceased to make use of them; and in the alternative of an eternal hatred or an excessive indulgence your good luck decides that my kindness should win the day. I shall therefore tell you my plan; but swear to me like a faithful knight that you will engage yourself in no other adventure until you have accomplished this. She is worthy of a hero; you will serve both love and vengeance; and it will be a *rouerie*¹ the more to put in your *mémoires*; yes, in your *mémoires*, for I wish them to be printed one day and I undertake to write them. But let us leave this and return to what concerns us.

Madame de Volanges is marrying her daughter; it is still a secret, but she told me about it yesterday. And whom do you think she has chosen for her son-in-law? The Comte de Gercourt. Who would have thought that I should become Gercourt's cousin? I am in a rage... Have you not guessed why? Dullard! Have *you* forgiven him the adventure with the *Intendante*? And have

¹The words *roué* and *rouerie*, which are happily falling out of use in good company, were very fashionable at the time these letters were written. (C. de L.).

²To understand this passage, the reader must know that the Comte de Gercourt had left the Marquise de Merteuil for the *Intendante de* —, who had sacrificed to him the Vicomte de Valmont and that it was then the Marquise and the Vicomte became attached to one another. Since

I not even more reason to complain of him, monster that you are?² But I calm myself and the hope of vengeance soothes my mind.

You have been a hundred times annoyed, as I have myself, by the consequence Gercourt attaches to the wife he is to have and by the silly presumption which makes him think he will avoid the inevitable fate. You know his ridiculous prejudices in favour of a cloistered education and his still more ridiculous preconception of the modesty of fair-haired women. Indeed I would wager that, in spite of the income of sixty thousand *livres* which goes with the Volanges girl, he would never have consented to the marriage if she had been dark or if she had not been to a convent. Let us prove to him that he is a mere fool; no doubt he will be one day—that is not what troubles me—but it would be amusing to have him begin by being one. How it will delight us to hear him boasting on the morning after (for he will boast); and then, if you once mould this girl, it would be very unlucky if Gercourt, like anybody else, does not become the talk of Paris.

Moreover, the heroine of this new adventure is worthy of all your attention; she is really pretty, she is only fifteen; a rosebud; ignorant to a degree and entirely unaffected, but you men are not afraid of that; in addition, a certain languid gaze seems to promise a great deal. Add to this that I recommend her to you; you have no more to do than to thank and obey me.

You will receive this letter to-morrow morning. I insist on your being with me to-morrow evening at seven o'clock. I shall receive nobody until eight, not even the reigning Chevalier; his mind is not equal to so important an affair. You see that love does not blind me. At eight o'clock I will grant you your liberty and you will return at ten to sup with the fair creature; for she and her mother are taking supper with me. Good-bye, it is after midday; very soon I shall cease to take an interest in you.

Paris, 4th August, 17—.

this adventure is much earlier than the events dealt with in these letters the whole correspondence about it has been suppressed. (C. de L.).

LETTER III

Cécile Volanges to Sophie Carnay

READER'S NOTE Written the same day as Merteuil's letter, this shows the other side of the plot. Cécile tells Sophie about her mother's supper party, where she felt stared at and whispered about. A relative of her mother called her "awkward" and then seemed to take a sudden liking to her, and Cécile and her mother are to sup at this lady's house tomorrow. Put that beside Letter II and you can work out who the lady is. Then there is the unnamed man who says, "We must let her ripen." Cécile has no idea how closely she is being watched.

I am still kept in ignorance, my dear. Yesterday Mamma invited a number of people to supper. In spite of the fact that it was to my interest to observe them, especially the men, I was very bored. Men and women, everybody, looked closely at me and then whispered in each others' ears. I saw they were talking about me; this made me blush; I could not prevent it. I wish I could have, for I noticed that when people looked at the other women they did not blush; or else the rouge they put on prevents one seeing the colour caused them by embarrassment; for it must be very difficult not to blush when a man looks steadily at you.

What made me most uneasy was that I did not know what they thought about me. I think I heard two or three times the word "Pretty"; but I very distinctly heard "Awkward"; and the latter must be true because the woman who said it is my mother's relative and friend; she even seemed to have a sudden friendship for me. She is the only person who talked to me at all during the evening. To-morrow we go to supper at her house.

After supper I heard a man who, I am sure, was speaking of me, say to another: "We must let her ripen; we shall see, this winter." Perhaps it is he who is to marry me; but then it will not be for four months! I wish I knew what is to be.

Here is Josephine, who tells me she is in a hurry. Yet I must tell you another *awkwardness* of mine. Oh! I am afraid the lady was right!

After supper gambling began. I was beside Mamma; I do not know how it happened, but I went to sleep almost at once. I was awakened by a loud burst of laughter. I do not know if they were laughing at me, but I think they were. Mamma gave me permission to go, which gave me great pleasure. Imagine! It was after eleven o'clock! Good-bye, my dear Sophie; always love your Cécile. I assure you the world is not as amusing as we imagined.

Paris, 4th August, 17—.

LETTER IV

The Vicomte de Valmont to the Marquise de Merteuil at Paris

READER'S NOTE Valmont declines. Writing from his aunt's château, he tells Merteuil that seducing an ignorant schoolgirl is beneath him and that he has a far grander target: Madame de Tourvel, famous for her piety and her loyalty to her absent husband. He wants Merteuil to admire his ambition. Enjoy his mock-religious language, borrowed from the devout household he is fooling, and his aunt's delight at seeing him at mass. Buried in the boasting is a revealing admission: he must have this woman to save himself from being in love with her. Is he joking?

Your orders are charming; your manner of giving them is still more amiable; you would make despotism attractive. As you know, this is not the first time that I regret I am no longer your slave; and however much of a *monster* you say I am I never think but with pleasure of the time you honoured me with softer names. Quite often I even hope to deserve them again and to end up with you by giving the world an example of constancy. But more important interests must occupy us; to conquer is our fate, and fate must be obeyed; perhaps we shall meet again at the end of our career; for be it said without offence, most fair Marquise, you follow me step by step; and since, after separating for the happiness of the world, we preach the faith separately, it seems to me that you make as many proselytes as I, in this mission of love. I know your zeal, your ardent fervour; and if this God estimated us by our works, you would one day be the patroness of some large town, while your friend at best would be a village saint. This form of expression surprises you, does it not? But for the last eight days I have heard and spoken none other; and in order to grow perfect in it I am forced to disobey you.

Do not be angry; and listen to me. You have shared all the secrets of my heart and I am about to confide to you the greatest project I have ever formed. What was it you proposed to me? To seduce a girl who has seen and knows nothing, who (so to speak) would be handed over to me defenceless, who could not fail to be intoxicated by a first attention and whom curiosity would probably lead more rapidly than love. There are twenty others who could succeed as well as I. But this is not the case with the enterprise which now occupies me; its success assures me as much fame as pleasure. The Love who is preparing my crown himself hesitates between myrtle and laurel, or rather he will unite them to honour my triumph. You yourself, my fair friend, will be seized by a holy respect and you will say enthusiastically: "Here is a man after my own heart."

You know Madame de Tourvel, her religious devotion, her conjugal love, her austere principles. That is what I am attacking; that is the enemy worthy of me; that is the end I mean to reach;

“And if I do not carry off the prize of obtaining her, At least I shall have the honour of having attempted it.”

Bad verses may be quoted when they are by a great poet.¹

You must know that her husband is in Burgundy on account of some big law-suit (I hope to make him lose a still more important one). His inconsolable spouse is compelled to spend here the whole time of her distressing widowhood. A mass every day, a few visits to the poor in the district, morning and evening prayers, solitary walks, pious conversations with my old aunt, and sometimes a dismal rubber of whist, are her only distractions. I am preparing more effectual ones for her. My good angel led me here for her happiness and for my own. Madman that I was! I regretted the twenty-four hours I sacrificed to the demands of convention. How I should be punished were I forced to return to Paris! Luckily, four people are needed for a hand of whist, and since there is no one here but the local *curé* my eternal aunt pressed me to sacrifice a few days to her. You may guess that I consented. You cannot imagine how much she has flattered me since then and above all how edified she is to see me regularly at prayer and at mass. She does not realise who is the divinity I adore. For the last four days I have given myself up to this powerful passion. You know I always desire keenly and sweep away obstacles; but what you cannot know is how much solitude adds to the ardour of desire. I have but one idea; I think of it by day and dream of it by night. I must have this woman, to save myself from the ridiculous position of being in love with her—for how far may not one be led by a thwarted desire? O delicious possession! I need you for my happiness and still more for my peace of mind. It is fortunate for us that women are so weak in their own defence! Otherwise we should be nothing but their timid slaves. At this very moment I have a feeling of gratitude for facile women which quite naturally brings me to your feet. I cast myself before them to obtain forgiveness and I conclude this long letter. Good-bye, fair lady—all in good part.

From the Château de..., 5th of August 17—.

¹La Fontaine.

LETTER V

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont

READER'S NOTE Merteuil answers with a demolition. She mocks Madame de Tourvel's looks and dress, warns Valmont that a prude will give him no pleasure and a husband is a humiliating rival, and threatens to stop trusting him. Is her scorn pure reason, or partly pique at being refused? The letter leaves room for both. She also reports news: young Danceny has fallen for Cécile, though she thinks him too timid to get anywhere. And she muses about ending things with her own lover, the Chevalier, because a lover in despair amuses her. Few lines reveal her better than her remark about the word "false."

Do you realise, Vicomte, that your letter is extremely insolent and that I ought to be angry with you? But it shows me you have lost your head and that fact alone saves you from my indignation. I am a generous and compassionate friend and forget my own injury to concern myself with your danger; and, however tiresome it may be to argue, I must yield to your present need of it.

You possess Madame de Tourvel! What a ridiculous caprice! I see it is your usual obstinacy which never wants except what seems impossible to obtain. What sort of a woman is she? Regular features, if you like, but a complete lack of expression; fairly well-made but entirely without grace; always ridiculously dressed with her bunches of neckerchief on her breast and her bodice up to her chin! I warn you as a friend, two women like her will ruin your reputation for you. Think of that day when she made the collection in Saint Roch, when you thanked me so often for having procured you such a spectacle! I can still see her, giving her hand to that hop-pole of a man with long hair, ready to sink down at every step, with her four yards of hoop-skirt continually on someone's head, and blushing at every bow. Who would have said then that you would desire such a woman? Come Vicomte, blush, and recover your senses. I promise you secrecy.

And then, think of the annoyances awaiting you. Who is the rival you must combat? A husband! Do you not feel humiliated by the mere word? What a disgrace if you fail! And how little glory if you succeed! I will go further—you must not expect any pleasure. Can there be any with prudes? I mean with those who are really so. They are reserved in the very midst of pleasure and can offer you nothing more than a half-enjoyment. That complete abandonment of self, that delirium of delight wherein pleasure is purified by its excess, those treasures of love are unknown to them. I warn you—supposing the best, your Madame de Tourvel will think she has done everything for you if she treats you like a husband, and in the tenderest conjugal interview the parties

always remain two. Here it is still worse; your prude is religious with the sort of religion which condemns a woman to perpetual childishness. Perhaps you will surmount this obstacle, but do not flatter yourself with the idea that you can destroy it; you may conquer the love of God, but not the fear of the devil; when you hold your mistress in your arms and feel her heart beating, it will be from terror, not from love. Perhaps if you had known this woman sooner you might have made something of her; but she is twenty-two and has been married nearly two years. Believe me, Vicomte, when a woman is *encrusted* to that extent she must be left to her fate; she will never be anything but a poor creature.

Yet it is for this fair object that you refuse to obey me, that you bury yourself in your aunt's tomb, that you give up a most delicious adventure which would do you the utmost honour! How does it happen that Gercourt always has the advantage over you? Come, I am talking to you good-humouredly; but at the moment I really am tempted to think you do not deserve your reputation, I am tempted to withdraw my confidence from you. I could never grow accustomed to confiding my secrets to Madame de Tourvel's lover.

You are to know that the Volanges girl has already turned one head. Young Danceny is madly in love with her. He has sung with her; and indeed she sings better than a girl just from a convent should. They are to go through a number of duets and I feel sure she will gladly be in unison; but Danceny is a mere child who will lose his time in making love and will never complete anything. The girl herself is quite shy and, in any event, it will be much less amusing than you could have made it; it puts me out of humour and I shall certainly quarrel with the Chevalier when he arrives. I advise him to be gentle; for, at the moment, I could break with him without reluctance. I am sure that if I had the good sense to leave him now he would be in despair; and nothing amuses me like a lover in despair. He would call me false, and the word "false" always gives me pleasure; after "cruel" it is the sweetest in a woman's ear and the least difficult to deserve. Seriously I must think about breaking off this affair. See what you are the cause of! I lay it on your conscience. Good-bye. Recommend me to Madame de Tourvel's prayers.

Paris, the 7th of August, 17—.

LETTER VI

The Vicomte de Valmont to the Marquise de Merteuil

READER'S NOTE Stung, Valmont leaps to Madame de Tourvel's defense and describes her with real warmth. Then comes the episode of the ditch, which he staged so he could hold her in his arms, and his confident reading of her racing heart. His tactics are careful: to forestall gossip, he has confessed some of his own exploits to her, and she now hopes to convert him. He also says he has not yet spoken the word "love." This letter is dated 9th August; keep it in mind, because Madame de Tourvel will describe the same days in her own way.

So there is no woman in the world who does not abuse her power! Even you, whom I so often called "an indulgent friend," cease to be so; you do not shrink from attacking me through the object of my affection! With what strokes you dared to paint Madame de Tourvel! A man would have paid for such insolence with his life and any woman but you would have been repaid at least by some revenge. I beg you will not subject me to such harsh tests; I cannot promise to endure them. In the name of friendship, wait until I have had the woman if you want to disparage her. Do you not know that pleasure alone has the right of loosening the bandage from Love's eyes?

But what am I saying? Does Madame de Tourvel need illusion? No, she needs but to be herself and she is adorable. You censure her for dressing badly and I agree with you; all clothes do her injustice, whatever hides her disfigures her. In the unconstraint of her morning-dress she is indeed delightful. Thanks to the extremely hot weather we are having, a morning-dress of simple linen allows me to see her round supple figure. Her breasts are hidden by a single fold of muslin and my furtive but keen glances have already spied out their enchanting shape. Her face, you say, lacks expression. And what should it express at a time when nothing speaks to her heart? No doubt, unlike our coquettes, she has not that delusive gaze which sometimes seduces and always deceives. She cannot cover the emptiness of a phrase by a false smile, and although she has the finest teeth imaginable she only laughs at what amuses her. But you should see her in her playful moments—what an image of frank, natural gaiety! What pure joy and pitying kindness are in her gaze when she hastens to help the unfortunate! Above all you should see her when at the least word of praise or flattery her divine face is coloured by the touching embarrassment of an unfeigned modesty! She is chaste and religious and therefore you think her cold and lifeless? I think very differently. What an amazing sensibility she must possess to be able to shed it even on her husband and to love continually

a person who is continually absent! What stronger proof could you desire? Yet I have been able to obtain another.

I arranged a walk so that we came upon a ditch which had to be crossed; and although she is very active, she is even more timid; you may imagine that a prude is afraid to take a leap.¹ She was compelled to accept my help. I have clasped this modest woman in my arms! Our preparations and the crossing of my old aunt sent our gay devotee into peals of laughter; but as soon as I took hold of her, by an intentional awkwardness on my part our arms became mutually entwined. I held her breast against my own and, in that brief moment, I felt her heart beat faster. Her face was suffused by a charming blush and her modest embarrassment showed me *that her heart had beaten with love and not with fear*. And yet my aunt was as mistaken as you and said: "The child was afraid"; but the *child's* charming candour does not permit her a lie and she answered naively: "O no, but..." That single word enlightened me. From that moment my cruel uneasiness gave way to a pleasing hope. I shall have this woman; I shall carry her away from the husband who profanes her; I shall even dare to ravish her from the God she adores. What a delicious pleasure to be alternately the cause and the conqueror of her remorse! Far be it from me to wish to destroy the prejudices which torture her! They will add to my happiness and my fame. Let her believe in virtue, but let her sacrifice it to me; let her slips terrify her without restraining her; let her be agitated by a thousand terrors and not be able to forget and to crush them save in my arms. Then I agree, she may say: "I adore you"—and she alone among all women will be worthy to say so. I shall indeed be the God she has preferred. Let us be frank; in our arrangements, as frigid as they are facile, that which we call happiness is scarcely a pleasure. Shall I confess it to you? I thought my heart withered up and, finding I had nothing left but my senses, I pitied myself for a premature old age. Madame de Tourvel has given me back the charming illusions of youth. Near her I do not need to enjoy her to be happy. The only thing which terrifies me is the time this adventure will take; for I can leave nothing to chance. However much I remind myself of my lucky audacities I cannot resolve to put them into practice. For me to be really happy she must give herself—that is no small matter. I am sure you will admire my prudence. The word "love" I have not yet spoken; but already we have got to "confidence" and "interest." To deceive her as little as possible and especially to forestall

¹The reader will perceive here that bad taste for puns which was beginning then and is now so popular. (C. de L.) "Sauter le fossé" means "to jump a ditch" and "to take a leap," "to cross the Rubicon."

any gossip which might reach her I have myself told her, as if accusing myself, some of my best known exploits. You would laugh to see the candour with which she reproves me. She says she wishes to convert me. She does not guess the price she would have to pay for attempting it. She is far from thinking that “by pleading” (as she puts it) “for the unfortunate women I have ruined,” that she is pleading beforehand on her own behalf. The idea came to me yesterday in the middle of one of her sermons and I could not refuse myself the pleasure of interrupting her, in order to tell her she spoke like a prophet. Good-bye, fairest lady! You see I am not irrecoverably lost.

P.S. By the way, has the poor Chevalier committed suicide in despair? Really, you are a hundred times worse than I am and you would humiliate me, were I conceited.

From the Château of..., 9th of August, 17—.

LETTER VII

*Cécile Volanges to Sophie Carnay*¹

READER'S NOTE Look at the date: this letter was written on 7th August, two days before Valmont's last, so the editor's order is not strictly by date. Cécile writes happily to Sophie about her singing lessons with the Chevalier Danceny, who comes every day, sings like an angel, and is so pleasant to be corrected by. She is falling in love and does not know it. She sighs that he is a Knight of Malta, and adds that if he married, his wife would be very happy. Laclos's footnote warns that Sophie's replies have all been cut.

If I have told you nothing about my marriage, the reason is that I know no more about it than I did the first day. I am growing used to not thinking about it and I find this kind of life quite suits me. I spend a good deal of time working at my singing and my harp; I seem to like them more now that I have no master, or rather now that I have a better one. The Chevalier Danceny, the gentleman of whom I spoke, and with whom I sang at Madame de Merteuil's house, is kind enough to come here every day and to sing with me for hours on end. He is extremely agreeable. He sings like an angel and composes most elegant airs to which he writes the words. What a pity he is a Knight of Malta! It seems to me that if he married, his wife would be very happy... His gentleness is charming. He never seems to be paying one a compliment and yet everything he says is flattering. He corrects me continually, as much in music as in anything else; but he mingles such interest and such gaiety with his criticism that it is impossible not to feel grateful to him. Only, when he looks at you, he seems to be saying something agreeable. And in addition, he is very unselfish. For example, yesterday, he was invited to an important concert—and he preferred to stay the whole evening here. It gave me a great deal of pleasure; for when he is not here, nobody speaks to me and I grow languid; but when he is here, we sing and converse together. He has always something new to tell me. He and Madame de Merteuil are the only two people I think agreeable. But good-bye, my dear, I have promised to learn for to-day an arietta with a very difficult accompaniment and I do not want to break my word; I shall practise it until he comes.

From..., 7th of August, 17—.

LETTER VIII

Madame de Tourvel to Madame de Volanges

READER'S NOTE Madame de Tourvel writes to Madame de Volanges to congratulate her on Cécile's engagement, and reminds her that she arranged Madame de Tourvel's own happy marriage. Then she mentions, almost in passing, the Vicomte de Valmont: better than his reputation, candid about his faults, and the target of her stern little sermons. Compare this with Letter VI, written the same day. She thinks she is lecturing a sinner; he thinks he is laying a trap. Valmont, we learn, knows she is writing this letter and sends his respects.

No one could be more touched than I am, Madame, by the confidence you show me, nor take more interest than I in the future of Mademoiselle de Volanges. With all my heart I wish her the happiness of which I am sure she is worthy and I rely upon your prudence to obtain it. I do not know the Comte de Gercourt; but, since he is honoured by your choice, I cannot but esteem him highly. I limit myself, Madame, to the wish that this marriage may be as happy as my own, which was likewise your work, and for which I am every day more grateful. May your daughter's happiness be your reward for the happiness you procured me; and may the best of friends be also the happiest of mothers!

I am indeed distressed that I cannot convey to you these sincere wishes in person and make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle de Volanges as soon as I should desire. Since I have received from you marks of kindness that were indeed maternal, I have the right to hope from her the tender friendship of a sister. I beg, Madame, you will be good enough to ask it of her on my behalf until I am in a position to merit it.

I have arranged to stay in the country for the whole time of Monsieur de Tourvel's absence. I have made use of this time to enjoy and profit by the society of the respectable Madame de Rosemonde. She is a woman who has remained charming; her great age has robbed her of nothing; she keeps her memory and her gaiety intact. Her body alone is eighty-eight; her spirit is only twenty.

Our solitude is enlivened by her nephew, the Vicomte de Valmont, who has been kind enough to spare us a few days. I only knew him by hearsay and what I heard made me little desirous to know more of him; but I think him better than rumour pretends. Here, where he is not spoiled by the whirl of society, he talks of Reason with astonishing facility and confesses his faults with rare candour. He speaks to me with great confidence and I lecture him with great severity. You, who know him, will admit that his conversion would be a great achievement; but in spite of his promises I have no doubt that a week of Paris will make him forget all my sermons. His stay here will at least be that much time taken from his ordinary conduct; and I really think after the way he has lived that the best thing he can do is to do nothing at all. He knows I am writing to you and asks me to convey to you his respectful regards. Accept mine also with your usual kindness and never doubt the sincere feelings with which I have the honour to be, etc.

From the Château of..., 9th of August, 17—.

LETTER IX

Madame de Volanges to Madame de Tourvel

READER'S NOTE Madame de Volanges replies with alarm. She warns her young friend that Valmont never says a word without a wicked purpose, that he chooses women as his victims, and that being seen alone with him could ruin her reputation. She advises her to get him sent away, or else to leave. Her warning is shrewd, yet the one woman she praises for having resisted him is the Marquise de Merteuil. Laclos's footnote spells out the irony. She also reports that Gercourt's regiment is ordered to Corsica, postponing the wedding until winter.

I have never doubted, my fair young friend, either your friendship for me or your sincere interest in my affairs. It is not for the purpose of clearing up this point—which I hope is forever settled between us—that I reply to your reply; but I cannot avoid discussing with you the subject of the Vicomte de Valmont.

I must admit I never expected to find that name in your letters. What can there be in common between you and him? You do not know this man; where could you have acquired the notion of a libertine's soul? You speak of his *rare candour*; ah yes! Valmont's candour must indeed be very rare. The more false and dangerous in that he is amiable and seductive, he has never from his earliest youth taken one step or said one word without a purpose, and he has never had a purpose but was wicked or criminal. My dear, you know me; you know that among the virtues I have tried to acquire, forbearance is the one

I most prize. And so, if Valmont were carried away by impetuous passions; if, like a thousand others, he were seduced by the errors of his age; while I blamed his conduct, I should pity his person and should await in silence the time when some fortunate change would acquire him the esteem of virtuous people. But Valmont is not that kind of man; his conduct is the result of his principles. He calculated all that a man may permit himself in wickedness without compromising himself; and, in order to be cruel and wicked without danger, he chose women for his victims. I will not stop to count those he has seduced; but how many has he not ruined?

In the quiet, retired life which you lead, such scandalous adventures do not reach you. I could tell you some which would make you shudder; but your gaze, as pure as your soul, would be sullied by such pictures; with the certainty that Valmont will never be dangerous to you, you do not need such weapons for your defence. The only thing I have to tell you is that among all the women to whom he has paid attentions, whether successful or no, there is not one but has had reason to complain of him. The Marquise de Merteuil is the single exception to this general rule; she alone was able to resist him and to restrain his wickedness. I must confess that this episode in her life is that which sets her highest in my estimation; and it suffices in the world's eyes as a full justification for certain imprudences she was reproached with when she was first a widow.¹

At all events, my dear, I am authorised by my age, my experience and above all by my friendship, to point out to you that people in society are beginning to notice Valmont's absence; if it is known that he has spent some time alone with you and his aunt your reputation will be in his hands—the greatest misfortune which can happen to a woman. I advise you to persuade his aunt not to detain him any longer; and if he persists in remaining I think you ought not to hesitate to leave. Why should he remain? What is he doing in that part of the country? If you watch his movements I am sure you will find out that he has simply chosen a convenient place for some evil purpose he is meditating in the neighbourhood. But, since it is impossible to remedy the evil, let us rest satisfied with preserving ourselves from it.

Good-bye, my dear; my daughter's marriage is postponed for a little while. The Comte de Gercourt, whom we were expecting every day, writes me that his regiment is ordered for Corsica; and since the war still drags on, it will be impossible for him to get away before the winter. It is vexatious; but still it lets

¹Madame de Volanges's error allows us to see that Valmont like other scoundrels did not reveal his accomplices. (C. de L.).

me hope that we shall have the pleasure of seeing you at the wedding, and I was sorry it should take place without you. Good-bye; without compliment and without reserve I am entirely yours.

P.S. Mention me to Madame de Rosemonde, whom I love as much as she deserves.

From..., 11th of August, 17—.

LETTER X

The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont

READER'S NOTE Merteuil writes at three in the morning to scold Valmont for being slow, timid, and obviously in love, and to lay out her own view of how a seduction should be conducted. Then she tells a story. Instead of breaking with her Chevalier, she staged a secret night at her hidden "little house," disguised as a maid, with Victoire dressed as a lackey. The planning is meticulous: rehearsing tones by reading, a note in someone else's handwriting, a second key kept back. And her closing line about who gives her more pleasure is surely meant to sting.

Are you sulking with me, Vicomte? Or are you dead? Or, which would be much the same thing, do you live only for your Madame de Tourvel? That woman, who has given you back *the illusions of youth*, will soon give you back its ridiculous prejudices. You are already timid and slavish; you might as well be in love. You have given up your fortunate audacities. You are acting without principles, leaving everything to chance, or rather to caprice. Have you forgotten that love, like medicine, is *simply* the art of aiding nature? You see I am beating you with your own weapons; but I feel no pride in it; it is beating a fallen man. *She must give herself*, you say; doubtless she must! And she will give herself like the others, with this difference: It will be with a bad grace. But in order that she may end up by giving herself, the best means is to begin by taking her. This ridiculous distinction is the merest raving in love! I say "love" because you are in love. To speak to you otherwise would be deceiving you; it would be hiding your disease from yourself. But tell me, O languishing lover, do you suppose you raped the other women you have had? But, however much a woman wants to give herself, however much of a hurry she may be in, some sort of pretext is necessary; and what could be more convenient for us than a pretext which makes us appear to yield to force? For my own part, I must confess that one of the things which most flatters me is a sharp and well conducted attack, where everything is carried out with order but with rapidity; which never puts us to the painful embarrassment of having

ourselves to repair an awkwardness by which we ought to have profited; which preserves an air of violence even in those things we grant, and cunningly flatters our two favourite passions—the glory of defence and the pleasure of defeat. I confess that this talent, which is much rarer than is generally believed, has always given me pleasure even when it has not attracted me; sometimes I have yielded myself simply as a recompense. As in our ancient tournaments, Beauty awarded the prize of valour and skill.

But as to you, you are no longer yourself, and you act as if you were afraid of succeeding. How long is it since you began to travel by short stages and side-tracks? My friend, when you want to get somewhere—post-horses and the main-road! But let us leave this subject, which gives me the more annoyance since it deprives me of the pleasure of seeing you. At least you might write to me more often than you do and give me news of your progress. Do you know that for more than a fortnight you have been occupied by this ridiculous adventure and have neglected everyone?

A propos negligence; you are like those people who send regularly for news of their sick friends and never ask what the reply was. You ended your last letter by asking me if the Chevalier is dead. I did not reply and you troubled no more about it. Have you forgotten that my lover is your sworn friend? Don't be uneasy, he is not dead; or if he were, it would be from excess of joy. Poor Chevalier, how tender he is! What a lover he is! How keenly he is affected! My head is in a whirl. Seriously, the perfect happiness he enjoys in being loved by me really attaches me to him.

The very day I wrote you that I was preparing to break with him, how happy I made him! I was actually thinking of the means to reduce him to despair when he was announced. Either from caprice or good sense, he never had appeared so well. However, I received him in a bad humour. He hoped to pass two hours with me before my door opened for the rest of the company. I told him that I was going out; he asked where I was going; I refused to tell him. He insisted. "Where you will not be," I replied tartly. Happily for him he was petrified by this reply; for if he had said a word there would have inevitably followed a scene which would have brought about the rupture I had planned. Astonished by his silence, I turned my eyes on him with no other purpose, I swear, than to see what countenance he was keeping. I perceived on his charming face that profound and tender sadness which you yourself admit is so difficult to resist. The same cause produced the same effect; I was conquered a second time. From that moment I only thought of how to avoid his thinking I had been disagreeable. "I am going out on business," said I, with

a slightly more gentle air, “and this business partly concerns you; but don’t ask me any questions. I shall dine at home; come back and you shall know all about it.” He then regained the use of speech; but I did not allow him to use it. “I am in a great hurry,” I continued, “Go away until this evening.” He kissed my hand and left.

Immediately, to compensate him, perhaps to compensate myself, I decided to show him my little house¹ about which he knew nothing. I called my faithful Victoire, I had my usual headache; the servants were told I was in bed; and, at last when I was alone with “the faithful servant,” I dressed myself as a waiting-woman while she disguised herself as a lackey. She then brought a cab to my garden gate and off we went. When we reached the Temple of Love, I chose the most seductive dishabille. It was really delicious; it is my own invention; it lets nothing be seen and yet allows everything to be guessed at. I promise you a pattern for your Madame de Tourvel—when you have rendered her worthy of wearing it.

After these preparations, while Victoire was occupied with the other details I read a chapter of the “Sopha,” a letter of “Héloïse” and two tales of La Fontaine, to rehearse the different tones I desired to take. Meanwhile my Chevalier comes to my door with his usual eagerness. My door-keeper stops him and tells him I am ill—the first incident. At the same time he gives him a letter from me, but not in my handwriting, according to my prudent rule. He opens it and finds in Victoire’s handwriting: “At nine o’clock precisely, on the Boulevard in front of the cafés.” He goes there; and a young lackey whom he does not know (at least whom he thinks he does not know, for it was Victoire) comes and tells him to send away his carriage and follow him. This whole romantic walk over-excites his brain and that never does any harm. He arrives at last; and surprise and love positively enchant him. To give him time to recover we take a turn in the shrubbery; then I bring him back to the house. He sees a table laid for two and a bed made up; we then go into the boudoir, which has all its decorations displayed. There, half out of premeditation, half from sentiment, I threw my arms around him and fell at his knees. “To prepare you the surprise of this moment,” I said, “I reproach myself for having troubled you with an appearance of ill-humour, with having veiled for an instant my heart from your gaze. Forgive these faults, I will expiate them by my love.” You may imagine the effect of that sentimental discourse. The happy

¹“*Petite-maison*,” a house kept secretly for lovers’ rendezvous, equivalent to the modern “*garçonnière*.” I am informed that such refuges are not unknown in England, but my informant could not tell me by what name they are distinguished.

Chevalier raised me and my pardon was sealed on the same ottoman upon which you and I so gaily and in the same way sealed our eternal separation.

Since we had six hours to spend together and I had determined that the whole time should be equally delicious to him, I moderated his transports, and my tenderness was replaced by amiable coquetry. I do not think I ever took so much trouble to please or that I was ever so satisfied with myself. After supper I was successively youthful and rational, playful and emotional, sometimes even wanton, and I pleased myself by considering him as a sultan in the midst of a harem in which I was successively the different favourites. Indeed, although his reiterated regards were always received by the same woman, it was always by a new mistress.

At last at daybreak we had to separate; and in spite of what he said and did even to prove to me the contrary, he needed it as much as he desired it little. At the moment when we left and as a last farewell, I took the key of this happy dwelling and put it into his hands. "I only acquired it for you," said I, "it is but right that you should be its master; the sacrificing priest should have the disposal of the temple." By this manoeuvre I forestalled any reflections which might have occurred to him from my ownership of this little house—which is always a suspicious thing. I know him well enough to be sure that he will only use it for me; and if I take a fancy to go there without him, I still have another key. At all costs he wished to fix another day there; but I still like him too much to want to use him up so quickly. One should only permit excess with those one intends to leave soon. He does not know that; but, for his happiness, I know it for two.

I see that it is three o'clock in the morning and that I have written a volume when I meant only to write a line. Such is the charm of confiding friendship; it is that which makes you still the person I like best, but to tell you the truth the Chevalier gives me more pleasure.

From ..., 12th of August, 17—.

LETTER XI

Madame de Tourvel to Madame de Volanges

READER'S NOTE Madame de Tourvel answers Madame de Volanges's warning with a spirited defense of Valmont. He has never spoken a word of love, she says, and she would like a brother just like him. She even takes his praise of Merteuil as proof of his honesty. Set this beside Valmont's own account of his careful strategy in Letter VI. She agrees, out of deference, to raise the question of his leaving, but clearly hopes not to. She also mentions his morning outings, when he says he goes shooting, though he rarely brings back any game; he assures her he is simply unskilful.

Your severe letter would have terrified me, Madame, if I had not fortunately more grounds for confidence than you find for fear. This dangerous Monsieur de Valmont, who must be the terror of all women, appears to have laid down his murderous arms before entering this *Château*. Far from forming plans here he has not even brought any affectations; and the quality of charm which even his enemies allow him has almost disappeared here, leaving him only good nature. Apparently, the country air has caused this miracle. I can assure you that, although he is constantly with me and even appears to take pleasure in it, he has never let slip a word resembling love, not one of those phrases which all men indulge in, without having—as he has—something to justify it. He never forces one into that reserve which every respectable woman nowadays is compelled to adopt towards the men by whom she is surrounded. He knows how to refrain from misusing the gaiety he creates. Perhaps he overpraises a little; but it is done with such delicacy that he would accustom modesty itself to panegyric. Indeed, if I had a brother, I should wish him to be such as Monsieur de Valmont shows himself here. Many women perhaps would wish him to pay them more marked attentions; I must confess I am infinitely grateful to him for having realised that I am not to be confounded with them.

Certainly this portrait is very different from the one you made me; and yet both may be likenesses at different periods. He himself admits he has had many faults and that he has been credited with more. But I have met few men who speak of virtuous women with so much respect, I might almost say, enthusiasm. What you tell me shows that at least in this matter he is not deceitful. His conduct with regard to Madame de Merteuil proves it. He often speaks of her, and always with so much praise and the appearance of so genuine an attachment that, until I received your letter, I thought that what he called the friendship between them was really love. I plead guilty to a hasty judgment here, and I was the more to blame since he himself has often taken

the trouble to justify her. I confess that I thought this artifice when it was really honest sincerity on his part. I don't know; but it seems to me that a man who is capable of so constant a friendship for so estimable a woman cannot be an abandoned libertine. I cannot say if we owe his good conduct here to certain intrigues in the neighbourhood, as you suppose. There are indeed several charming women round about; but he seldom goes out, except in the morning, and then he says he goes shooting. It is true he rarely brings back any game; but he assures me he is unskilful in that exercise. In any case, what he does out of doors does not concern me much; and if I did wish to know, it would only be to have one more reason for sharing your view or bringing you to mine.

As to your proposal that I should take measures to shorten Monsieur de Valmont's stay here, it appears to me very difficult to presume to ask his aunt not to have her nephew in her house, the more so since she is very attached to him. Yet I promise you, merely from deference and not from necessity, to take the first opportunity of making this request either to her or to him. As to myself, Monsieur de Tourvel knows I have arranged to stay here until he returns and he will rightly enough be surprised at my inconsistency if I change my plans.

This is a very long explanation, Madame, but I thought I owed it to truth to give a favourable account of Monsieur de Valmont, which he appears to stand in great need of with you. I am none the less sensible of the friendship which dictated your advice. I owe to it also the obliging things you say to me about the postponement of your daughter's marriage. I thank you sincerely; but, however great my pleasure would be in passing that time with you, I would gladly sacrifice it to my desire to see Mademoiselle de Volanges sooner happy, if she can ever be happier than at the side of a mother so worthy of all her tenderness and respect. I share with her these two sentiments which attach me to you and I beg you to receive kindly this assurance of them. I have the honour to be, etc.

From..., 13th of August, 17—.

LETTER XII

Cécile Volanges to the Marquise de Merteuil

READER'S NOTE A short note, but a telling one. Cécile writes to Merteuil to say she must miss an outing to the Opera because her mother is unwell, and she adds an eager "I like you so much!" She also asks Merteuil to pass a message to Danceny about an album he mentioned, since he will be turned away if he calls today. How readily Cécile turns to Merteuil, the woman whose plans for her we have already read in Letter II, as the natural link between herself and Danceny.

Mamma is indisposed, Madame; she will not go out and I must keep her company; so I shall not have the honour of going to the Opera with you. I assure you that I far more regret not being with you than missing the performance. I beg you will believe me. I like you so much! Would you be so kind as to tell Monsieur le Chevalier Danceny that I do not possess the album of which he spoke and that it would give me great pleasure if he would bring it to me to-morrow? If he comes to-day he will be told we are not at home; but that is because Mamma does not wish to receive anybody. I hope she will be better to-morrow.

I have the honour to be, etc.

From..., 13th of August, 17—.

The letters continue...

This sample ends with Letter XII.
The complete edition contains all one hundred and seventy-five letters,
with a reader's note before each one.

Glossary

arietta A short, light song for solo voice, a little aria.

Chevalier Literally "knight"; a title commonly used by younger sons of noble families. Both Merteuil's lover and Danceny are called by it.

curé A parish priest.

dishabille Loose, informal dress worn in private, as opposed to formal clothes for company.

entailed Legally settled so that it must pass to a particular heir. Madame de Rosemonde's estate is bound to go to Valmont.

Héloïse Rousseau's hugely popular novel in letters, Julie, or the New Héloïse (1761), famous for its passionate, high-minded expressions of love.

hoop-skirt A skirt spread wide over a frame of hoops, a formal fashion of the period that could make moving through a crowd awkward.

in fiocchi An Italian phrase, literally "in tassels," meaning dressed up in one's finest clothes.

Intendant The wife of an intendant, a powerful royal official who administered a French province on the king's behalf.

Knight of Malta A member of the Order of St. John, a religious and military order based on the island of Malta. Its knights took vows that included celibacy, which is why Cécile regrets that Danceny belongs to it.

La Fontaine Jean de La Fontaine, the seventeenth-century poet best known for his Fables, who also wrote witty and bawdy tales in verse. Valmont quotes him in Letter IV, and Merteuil reads two of his tales in Letter X.

lackey A male servant or footman in livery.

little house A small house kept secretly for romantic meetings, in French a *petite-maison*. Owning one was considered a suspicious sign in itself.

livres The *livre* was the chief unit of French money before the Revolution. An income of sixty thousand *livres* a year made a young woman a very rich match.

Marquise The wife or widow of a *marquis*, a rank of nobility above a count.

post-horses Fresh horses hired at relay stations along the main roads, so a traveler could change teams and go fast. Merteuil means Valmont should stop dawdling.

Président A senior magistrate in one of the high courts of pre-Revolutionary France. His wife bore the courtesy title of Présidente, which the translator renders simply as "Madame" de Tourvel.

rouerie The conduct of a roué, a fashionable rake; a clever, calculated piece of wickedness or trickery.

rouge Red cosmetic worn on the cheeks. Fashionable ladies of the period wore it heavily, which is why Cécile suspects it hides their blushes.

Saint Roch A fashionable church in central Paris. Ladies of good family were sometimes chosen to take up the collection for charity during services there.

Sopha Le Sopha, a naughty novel of 1742 by Crébillon the younger, in which a man's soul trapped inside a sofa witnesses the love affairs conducted on it.

turning-box A revolving hatch set into a convent wall, through which letters and parcels could pass between the nuns and the outside world without anyone being seen.

Ursuline The Ursulines were an order of nuns devoted to educating girls; many well-born French daughters were schooled in their convents until they married.

Vicomte A viscount, a rank of nobility just below a count.

whist A card game for four players in two partnerships, an ancestor of bridge. A "rubber" is a set of games.