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LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

A Play

by Christopher Hampton

From the novel by

Choderlos de Laclos

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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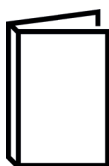
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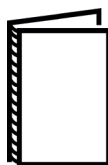


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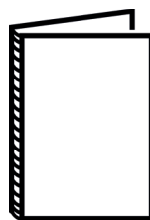
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Christopher Hampton became involved in theatre while studying French and German at Oxford University, and wrote a play in his first year. The Royal Court's production was so successful that it transferred to the Comedy Theatre while he was still a student, making him the youngest writer ever to have a play performed in the West End – a record which still stands. He said at the time that he also hoped to become the oldest writer to have a play in the West End, an ambition he has yet to achieve.

His plays, musicals and translations have so far garnered four Tony Awards, three Olivier Awards, five Evening Standard Awards and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award; prizes for his film and television work include an Oscar, two BAFTAs, a Writers' Guild of America Award, the Prix Italia, a Special Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival, Hollywood Screenwriter of the Year, and The Collateral Award at the Venice Film Festival for Best Literary Adaptation.

His works for the stage include original plays (*Appomattox*, *The Talking Cure*, *White Chameleon*, *Tales from Hollywood*, *Treats*, *Savages*, *The Philanthropist*, *Total Eclipse* and *When Did You Last See My Mother?*); plays adapted from novels (Ödön von Horváth's *Youth Without God*, Sándor Márai's *Embers*, Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, George Steiner's novella *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*); musicals (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Dracula: The Musical* and, most recently, *Stephen Ward*, all with Don Black); libretti (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Appomattox* and *The Trial*, all with composer Philip Glass); and many translations (plays by Chekhov, Ibsen, Molière, Horváth, Yasmina Reza, Daniel Kehlmann and Florian Zeller; and a German musical based on Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*).

Hampton's screenplays include most recently *Ali* and *Nino* (based on the novel by Kurban Said), *Adore* (based on Doris Lessing's *The Grandmothers*), *A Dangerous Method* (based on his play *The Talking Cure*), *Chéri* (from the novel by Colette), *Atonement* (from the novel by Ian McEwan), *Imagining Argentina* (which he also directed), *The Quiet American* (from the Graham Greene novel), *The Secret Agent* (from Joseph Conrad's novel, and which he also directed), *Mary Reilly* (from Valerie Martin's novel inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*), *Total Eclipse* (from his play of the same name, and in which he also performed), *Carrington* (the first film he also directed), *Dangerous Liaisons* (based on his play *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*), *The Good Father* (from the novel by Peter Prince), *The Honorary Consul* (from Graham Greene's novel), *Tales from the Vienna Woods* (from the von Horváth play) and *A Doll's House* (based on his translation of the play by Ibsen).

His television scripts include mini-series *The Ginger Tree* (from the novel by Oswald Wynd), *Hôtel Du Lac* (from the Anita Brookner novel), *The History Man* (from Malcolm Bradbury's novel), *Able's Will* and most recently *The Thirteenth Tale* starring Vanessa Redgrave and Olivia Colman, based on the novel by Diane Setterfield.

Upcoming plays in 2018 include *Tartuffe* in the West End and *The Height of the Storm* at Wyndham's Theatre, London. *The Height of the Storm* is the fifth Florian Zeller play Hampton has translated, following *The Mother*, *The Father*, *The Truth* and *The Lie*.

LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

First produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon on 24th September, 1985, with the following cast of characters:

LA MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL	Lindsay Duncan
MME DE VOLANGES	Fiona Shaw
CÉCILE VOLANGES	Lesley Manville
MAJOR-DOMO	Hugh Simon
LE VICOMTE DE VALMONT	Alan Rickman
AZOLAN	Christopher Wright
MME DE ROSEMONDE	Margery Mason
LA PRÉSIDENTE DE TOURVEL	Juliet Stevenson
ÉMILIE	Mary Jo Randle
LE CHEVALIER DANCENY	Sean Baker

Various servants in the Merteuil, Rosemonde, Tourvel and Valmont households

Directed by Howard Davies
 Designed by Bob Crowley
 Lighting by Chris Parry
 Music by Ilona Sekacz

Subsequently produced at The Pit, Barbican, on 8 January 1986, with the following cast of characters:

LA MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL	Lindsay Duncan
MME DE VOLANGES	Fiona Shaw
CÉCILE VOLANGES	Lesley Manville
MAJOR-DOMO	Hugh Simon
LE VICOMTE DE VALMONT	Alan Rickman
AZOLAN	Christopher Wright
MME DE ROSEMONDE	Margery Mason
LA PRÉSIDENTE DE TOURVEL	Juliet Stevenson
ÉMILIE	Mary Jo Randle
LE CHEVALIER DANCENY	Sean Baker

Directed by Howard Davies
 Designed by Bob Crowley
 Lighting by Chris Parry
 Music by Ilona Sekacz

The action of the play takes place in various salons and bedrooms in a number of hotels and châteaux in and around Paris, and in the Bois de Vincennes, one autumn and winter in the 1780s.

ACT I

- Scene One** An August evening. Mme la Marquise de Merteuil's salon
- Scene Two** Three weeks later, early evening. The principal salon in Mme de Rosemonde's château in the country
- Scene Three** A couple of days later, the middle of the night. Émilie's bedroom in her house on the outskirts of Paris
- Scene Four** Ten days later, a September afternoon. The grand salon of La Marquise de Merteuil
- Scene Five** A week later, after lunch. The salon in Mme de Rosemonde's château
- Scene Six** A fortnight later; the middle of the night. Cécile's bedroom in the château
- Scene Seven** The following day, 1st October; afternoon. The salon in Mme de Rosemonde's château
- Scene Eight** Two nights later, Valmont's bedroom in the château
- Scene Nine** Late the following evening; the salon in the chateâu

ACT II

- Scene One** Late October; the principal salon in Valmont's Paris house
- Scene Two** Two days later, six p.m. The salon in Mme de Tourvel's house
- Scene Three** The following evening; Merteuil's salon
- Scene Four** A fortnight later; afternoon. The salon in Valmont's house
- Scene Five** Ten days later; evening. Mme de Merteuil's salon
- Scene Six** The following afternoon. The salon in Mme de Tourvel's house
- Scene Seven** About a week later. A December evening in Mme de Merteuil's salon
- Scene Eight** A misty December dawn in the Bois de Vincennes
- Scene Nine** New Year's Eve; Mme de Merteuil's salon

Note: Both for practical reasons and to enhance the fluidity of the action, the play was performed without breaks (except for the interval) or set-changes, up to the end of **ACT II, Scene Seven**, when the set was cleared, except for a table and three chairs, for the last two scenes.

C.H.

To Roger

ACT I

Scene One

A warm evening in August.

The principal salon in the Paris hôtel of MME LA MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL. The MARQUISE, a respectable widow of considerable means, is playing piquet with her cousin, MME DE VOLANGES, who is herself a widow. Sitting next to MME DE VOLANGES, watching her play and politely stifling the occasional yawn, is her daughter CÉCILE, a slim and attractive blonde girl of fifteen. Suggestions of great opulence. The large playing cards slap down on one another.

MERTEUIL *interrupts the game to examine CÉCILE with some care.*

MERTEUIL Well, my dear.

CÉCILE, *who has been daydreaming, starts, not quite sure, for a second, if it's she who's being addressed.*

So you've left the convent for good?

CÉCILE Yes, Madame.

MERTEUIL And how are you adapting to the outside world?

CÉCILE Very well, I think. I'm so excited to have my own bedroom and dressing room.

VOLANGES I've advised her to watch and learn and be quiet except when spoken to. She's very naturally still prone to

confusion. Yesterday she was under the impression my shoemaker had come for dinner.

CÉCILE It wasn't that, Maman, it was when he fell to his knees and caught hold of my foot. It startled me.

MERTEUIL No doubt you thought he was attempting to propose marriage.

CÉCILE I... *(She breaks off, blushing)*

MERTEUIL Never mind, my dear, you'll soon get used to it. We must see what we can devise for your amusement.

The game resumes. Silence.

After a time, MERTEUIL'S MAJOR-DOMO appears, advances hurriedly across the room and murmurs something in MERTEUIL's ear.

(sighing) Oh, very well, show him up.

The MAJOR-DOMO bows and withdraws.

MERTEUIL *turns back to the others.*

Valmont is here.

VOLANGES You receive him, do you?

MERTEUIL Yes. So do you.

VOLANGES I thought perhaps that under the circumstances...

MERTEUIL Under what circumstances? I don't believe I have any grounds for self-reproach...

VOLANGES On the contrary. As far as I know, you're virtually unique in that respect.

MERTEUIL ...and, of course, if I had, he would no longer be calling on me.

CÉCILE has been following this exchange closely, frowning in the attempt to make sense of it. Now MME DE VOLANGES turns to her.

VOLANGES Monsieur le Vicomte de Valmont, my child, whom you very probably don't remember, except that he is conspicuously charming, never opens his mouth without first calculating what damage he can do.

CÉCILE Then why do you receive him, Maman?

VOLANGES Everyone receives him. He has a distinguished name, a large fortune and a very pleasant manner. You'll soon find that society is riddled with such inconsistencies: we're all aware of them, we all deplore them and in the end we all accommodate to them. Besides which, people are quite rightly afraid to provoke his malice. No one has the slightest respect for him; but everyone is very nice to him. *(She breaks off)*

The MAJOR-DOMO reappears, escorting LE VICOMTE DE VALMONT, a strikingly elegant figure. He crosses the room and bows formally to MERTEUIL in a gesture which takes in the others. The MAJOR-DOMO exits.

VALMONT Madame.

MERTEUIL Vicomte.

VOLANGES What a pleasant surprise.

VALMONT How delightful to see you, Madame.

VOLANGES You remember my daughter, Cécile.

VALMONT Well, indeed, but who could have foretold she would flower so gracefully?

CÉCILE simpers and looks away. VALMONT turns back to MERTEUIL.

I wanted to call on you before leaving the city.

MERTEUIL Oh, I'm not sure we can allow that. Why should you want to leave?

VALMONT Paris in August, you know: and it's time I paid a visit to my old aunt, I've neglected her disgracefully.

MERTEUIL I approve of your aunt. She takes such an intelligent interest in the young, she's been able to maintain a kind of youthfulness of her own. All the same...

VOLANGES Will you please give Madame de Rosemonde our warmest regards? She's been good enough to invite us to stay at the château, and I hope perhaps later in the season...

VALMONT I shall make a point of it, Madame. Please don't let me interrupt your game.

VOLANGES I think I may have lost enough for this evening.

In the ensuing silence, they become aware that CÉCILE is fast asleep.

VALMONT Your daughter evidently finds our conversation intriguing.

VALMONT laughs and MERTEUIL joins in, causing CÉCILE to jerk awake in confusion.

CÉCILE Oh, I'm sorry, I...

VOLANGES I think it's time we took you home.

CÉCILE I'm used to being asleep by nine at the convent.

VALMONT So I should hope.

The ladies rise to their feet and MERTEUIL signals to a footman, who moves over to escort MME DE VOLANGES and CÉCILE from the room, amid general salutations.

VALMONT bows to them and waits, a little apart. Eventually, MERTEUIL moves back towards him. They're alone together and look at each other for a while before MERTEUIL speaks, in a quite different tone.

MERTEUIL Your aunt?

VALMONT That's right.

MERTEUIL Whatever for? I thought she'd already made arrangements to leave you all her money.

VALMONT She has. But there are other considerations, family obligations, that kind of thing.

MERTEUIL Do you know why I summoned you here this evening?

VALMONT I'd hoped it might be for the pleasure of my company.

MERTEUIL I need you; to carry out a heroic enterprise. Something for your memoirs.

VALMONT I don't know when I shall ever find the time to write my memoirs.

MERTEUIL Then I'll write them.

Silence. VALMONT smiles at her.

You remember when Gercourt left me?

VALMONT Yes.

MERTEUIL And went off with that fat mistress of yours, whose name escapes me?

VALMONT Yes, yes.

MERTEUIL No one has ever done that to me before. Or to you, I imagine.

VALMONT I was quite relieved to be rid of her, frankly.

MERTEUIL No, you weren't.

Silence.

One of Gercourt's more crass and boring topics of conversation was what exactly he would look for in a wife, what qualities, when the moment came for him, as he put it, to settle down.

VALMONT Yes.

MERTEUIL He had a ludicrous theory that blondes were inherently more modest and respectable than any other species of girl and he was also unshakeably prejudiced in favour of convent education. And now he's found the ideal candidate.

VALMONT Cécile Volanges?

MERTEUIL Very good.

VALMONT And her sixty thousand a year, that must have played some part in his calculations.

MERTEUIL I tell you, if she were an uncloistered brunette, she could be worth twice that, and he wouldn't go near her. His priority, you see, is a guaranteed virtue.

VALMONT I wonder if I'm beginning to guess what it is you're intending to propose.

MERTEUIL Gercourt is with his regiment in Corsica until October. That should give you plenty of time.

VALMONT You mean to...?

MERTEUIL She's a rosebud.

VALMONT You think so?

MERTEUIL And he'd get back from honeymoon to find himself the laughing-stock of Paris.

VALMONT Well...

MERTEUIL Yes. Love and revenge: two of your favourites.

Silence. VALMONT considers for a moment. Finally, he shakes his head, smiling.

VALMONT No, I can't.

MERTEUIL What?

VALMONT You know how difficult I find it to disobey your orders. But really, I can't.

MERTEUIL Why not?

VALMONT It's too easy. It is. What is she, fifteen, she's seen nothing, she knows nothing, she's bound to be curious, she'd be on her back before you'd unwrapped the first bunch of flowers. Any one of a dozen men could manage it. I have my reputation to think of.

MERTEUIL I think you underestimate her. She's very pretty, and she has a rather promising air of languor.

VALMONT You mean, she falls asleep a lot? Well, perhaps your Belleruche is the man for her.

MERTEUIL Belleruche is an idealist.

VALMONT Oh, bad luck, I knew there was something the matter with him.

MERTEUIL There is someone who's already fallen for her: young Danceny. He goes round to sing duets with her.

VALMONT And you think he'd like to try a little close harmony?

MERTEUIL Yes, but he's as timid and inexperienced as she is, we couldn't rely on him. So, you see, it'll just have to be you.

VALMONT I hate to disappoint you.

MERTEUIL I think you really are going to refuse me. Aren't you?

Silence. VALMONT looks at her.

VALMONT I can see I'm going to have to tell you everything.

MERTEUIL Of course you are.

VALMONT Yes. Well. My trip to the country to visit my more or less immortal aunt. The fact of the matter is that it's the first step towards the most ambitious plan I've ever undertaken.

MERTEUIL Well, go on.

VALMONT You see, my aunt is not on her own just at the moment. She has a young friend staying with her. Madame de Tourvel.

MERTEUIL Yes.

VALMONT She is my plan.

MERTEUIL You can't mean it.

VALMONT Why not? To seduce a woman famous for strict morals, religious fervour and the happiness of her marriage: what could possibly be more prestigious?

MERTEUIL I think there's something very degrading about having a husband for a rival. It's humiliating if you fail and commonplace if you succeed. Where is he, anyway?

VALMONT He's presiding over some labyrinthine case in Burgundy, which I'm reliably informed will drag on for months.

MERTEUIL I can't believe this. Apart from anything else, she's such a frump. Bodice up to her ears in case you might catch a glimpse of a square inch of flesh...

VALMONT You're right, clothes don't suit her.

MERTEUIL How old is she?

VALMONT Twenty-two.

MERTEUIL And she's been married...?

VALMONT Two years.

MERTEUIL Even if you succeed, you know what?

VALMONT What?

MERTEUIL All you'll get from her is what she gives her husband. I don't think you can hope for any actual pleasure. They never let themselves go, those people. If you ever make her heart beat faster, it won't be love, it'll be fear. I sometimes wonder about you, Vicomte. How could you make such a fool of yourself over a complete nonentity?

VALMONT Take care, now, you're speaking of the woman I...

MERTEUIL Yes?

VALMONT I've set my heart on.

Silence. VALMONT smiles at her.

I haven't felt so strongly about anything since you and I were together.

MERTEUIL And you're going to pass up this wonderful opportunity for revenge?

VALMONT If I have to.

MERTEUIL You don't have to. I won't tell anyone about this bizarre aberration of yours.

VALMONT I think you'll have to wait at least until I've had her before I can allow you to insult her. And I can't agree with your theory about pleasure. You see, I have no intention of breaking down her prejudices. I want her to believe in God and virtue and the sanctity of marriage, and still not be able to stop herself. I want passion, in other words. Not the kind we're used to, which is as cold as it's superficial, I don't get much pleasure out of that any more. No. I want the excitement of watching her betray everything that's most important to her. Surely you understand that. I thought betrayal was your favourite word.

MERTEUIL No, no, cruelty, I always think that has a nobler ring to it.

VALMONT You're terrible, you're a hundred times worse than I'll ever be; since we started this little mission, you've made many more converts than I have, you make me feel like an amateur.

MERTEUIL And so you are; really, you might just as well be in love.

VALMONT Well, if love is not being able to think of anything else all day or dream of anyone else all night, perhaps I am: that's why I must have her, to rescue myself from this ridiculous position.

MERTEUIL Love is something you use, not something you fall into, like a quicksand, don't you remember? It's like medicine, you use it as a lubricant to nature.

They look at each other.

VALMONT How is Belleruche?

MERTEUIL Well, he *is* in love. I thought it might be time to end it last week, I tried to pick a quarrel, but he looked so

woebegone, I relented, and we spent the best night we've ever had. Since then, of course, he's been more assiduous than ever. But I'm keeping him at arm's length because I'm so pleased with him. He hasn't learned that excess is something you reserve for people you're about to leave.

VALMONT So you're not about to leave him?

MERTEUIL No, I told you, at the moment I'm very pleased with him.

VALMONT And he's currently your only lover?

MERTEUIL Yes.

VALMONT I think you should take another. I think it most unhealthy, this exclusivity.

MERTEUIL You're not jealous, are you?

VALMONT Well, of course I am. Belleruche is completely undeserving.

MERTEUIL I thought he was one of your closest friends.

VALMONT Exactly, so I know what I'm talking about. No, I think you should organize an infidelity. With me, for example.

MERTEUIL But we decided it was far more important to preserve our friendship and to be able to trust each other implicitly.

VALMONT Are you sure that wasn't just a device to heighten our pleasure?

MERTEUIL You refuse to grant me a simple favour, and then you expect to be indulged.

VALMONT It's only because it is so simple. It wouldn't feel like a conquest. I have to follow my destiny, you see. I have to be true to my profession.

MERTEUIL Well...

Long silence. They look at each other, MERTEUIL amused, VALMONT eager.

In that case, come back when you've succeeded with Madame de Tourvel.

VALMONT Yes?

MERTEUIL And I will offer you...a reward.

VALMONT My love.

MERTEUIL But I shall require proof.

VALMONT Certainly.

MERTEUIL Written proof.

VALMONT Ah.

MERTEUIL Not negotiable.

VALMONT rises to his feet and bows. MERTEUIL watches him, smiling.

VALMONT And I'm sure you'll find someone to help you out with the little Volanges.

MERTEUIL She's so lovely. If my morals were less austere, I'd take it on myself.

VALMONT You are an astonishing woman.

MERTEUIL Thank you.

VALMONT I'm only sorry you haven't sufficient confidence in me to give me my reward in advance.

MERTEUIL Goodnight, Vicomte.

VALMONT kisses her hand, releases it and stands looking at her for a moment, before turning away.

Scene Two

Three weeks later. Early evening. The principal salon in MME DE ROSEMONDE's château in the country. The late sun slants through the French windows.

VALMONT *is interviewing AZOLAN, his valet de chambre, a dapper young man, resplendent in the livery of a chasseur.*

VALMONT So he grasped what was going on, did he?

AZOLAN Oh, yes, sir. I was watching him and he was watching you.

VALMONT I just hope he was better at understanding what was happening than he was at shadowing me; I sat down for a rest on the way and he was trampling about behind some bush, making so much noise I had a good mind to give him a legful of small shot. Except then I suppose he'd have had even more trouble keeping up.

AZOLAN He knew what you were doing; and after you'd gone he talked to the family.

VALMONT I must say the family was very well chosen.

AZOLAN Thank you, sir.

VALMONT Solidly respectable, gratifyingly tearful, no suspiciously pretty girls. Well done.

AZOLAN I do my best for you, sir.

VALMONT And not even unduly expensive. Fifty-six livres to save an entire family from ruin, that seems a genuine bargain.

AZOLAN These days, my lord, you can find half a dozen like that, any village in the country.

VALMONT Really? I must say, it's no longer a mystery to me why people fall so easily into the habit of charitable enterprises. All that humble gratitude. It was most affecting.

AZOLAN Certainly brought a tear to my eye, sir.

VALMONT How are you getting on with the maid?

AZOLAN Julie? Tell you the truth, it's been a bit boring. If I wasn't so anxious to keep your lordship abreast, I think I'd only have bothered the once. I'm not sure she doesn't feel the same, but, you know, what else is there to do in the country?

VALMONT Yes, it wasn't so much the details of your intimacy I was after, it was whether she's agreed to bring me Madame de Tourvel's letters and do you think she'll keep her mouth shut?

AZOLAN She won't steal the letters, sir.

VALMONT She won't?

AZOLAN You know better than me, sir, it's easy enough making them do what they want to do; it's trying to get them to do what you want them to do, that's what gives you a headache.

VALMONT And them, as often as not.

AZOLAN As for keeping her mouth shut, I haven't asked her to keep her mouth shut, because that's the one thing most likely to give her the idea of opening it.

VALMONT You may well be right. But look, Madame de Tourvel told me she'd been warned about me: that means some officious friend must have written to her about me. I need to know who.

AZOLAN I shouldn't worry about all that, if I was you, sir. If she's interested enough to have you followed, I'd say it was only a matter of time.

VALMONT Do you think so?

AZOLAN Anyway, apparently she keeps her letters in her pockets.

VALMONT I wish I knew how to pick pockets. Why don't our parents ever teach us anything useful? (*pause, as he considers*) Where do you and Julie meet?

AZOLAN Oh, in my room, sir.

VALMONT And is she coming tonight?

AZOLAN Afraid so.

VALMONT Then I think I may have to burst in on you. See if blackmail will succeed better than bribery. About two o'clock suit you? I don't want to embarrass you, will that give you enough time?

AZOLAN Ample, sir.

VALMONT Good.

AZOLAN Then you won't have to pay her, sir, will you?

VALMONT Oh, I think if she delivers, we can afford to be generous, don't you?

AZOLAN It's your money, sir.

VALMONT Don't worry, I shan't overlook your contribution.

AZOLAN Well, that's very decent of you, sir.

VALMONT looks up at the sound of approaching female voices. He turns back to AZOLAN.

VALMONT Off you go, then. See you at two.

AZOLAN Right, sir. I'll be sure to arrange her so she can't say she's there to borrow a clothes brush.

AZOLAN leaves by one door as MME DE ROSEMONDE and MME DE TOURVEL arrive by another. MME DE ROSEMONDE is eighty-four, arthritic but lively, intelligent and sympathetic; and MME DE TOURVEL is a handsome woman of twenty-two, dressed not as MERTEUIL described, but in an elegantly plain linen gown. She is clearly in a state of considerable excitement.

ROSEMONDE Here he is. I said he would be here.

VALMONT rises to greet them. TOURVEL cannot help reacting to his presence.

VALMONT Ladies.

ROSEMONDE Madame de Tourvel has some mystery to reveal to us.

TOURVEL To you, Madame, to you.

VALMONT Oh, well, then, perhaps I should go for a walk.

TOURVEL No, no, it, it concerns you as well, I mean, it particularly concerns you. In fact, I must begin by asking you some questions.

VALMONT Very well. Just let me help my aunt to her chair.

VALMONT installs MME DE ROSEMONDE in her armchair, then turns his attention back to MME DE TOURVEL.

Now.

TOURVEL Where did you go this morning, Monsieur?

VALMONT Well, as you know, I was up early to go out hunting.

TOURVEL And did you succeed in making a kill this time?

VALMONT No, I've had the most wretched luck ever since I arrived here. Also I'm a terrible shot.

TOURVEL But on this occasion, Monsieur le Vicomte, what exactly was it you were hunting?

VALMONT I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't quite follow...

TOURVEL You may as well own up, Monsieur, I know where you were this morning.

ROSEMONDE I think it's time somebody explained to me what's going on.

TOURVEL Georges, my footman, just happened to be in the village earlier today...

VALMONT I do hope you haven't been listening to servants' gossip.

TOURVEL I can see Monsieur de Valmont is determined not to tell you, so I shall have to. There's a family in the village, the

man has been ill, he found himself not able to pay his taxes this year. So this morning the bailiff arrived to seize their few sticks of furniture. Whereupon your nephew, whose valet had been making enquiries in the village to see if anyone was suffering from particular hardship, arrived, paid off the family's debts and added a generous contribution to help them back on their feet again.

ROSEMONDE Is this true, my dear?

VALMONT Well, I ...it's simply...yes.

MME DE ROSEMONDE rises to her feet and spreads out her arms.

ROSEMONDE You dear boy, come and let me give you a hug!

VALMONT crosses to her and they embrace. Then VALMONT turns and advances towards MME DE TOURVEL, smiling radiantly, his arms outstretched. A spasm of panic crosses her face but she has no choice but to submit to the embrace: VALMONT squeezes her powerfully. Then he releases her and, as she looks at him, ashen and mesmerized, he turns aside, wiping away a surreptitious tear.

It's so like you to make a secret of something like that.

In the ensuing silence, MME DE TOURVEL moves across to the tapestry frame, and picks up the already-threaded needle. But her hands are shaking so badly, she has to put it down again.

We must visit this family in the morning, my dear, to see if we can help in any other way.

TOURVEL Yes, I'd like that.

VALMONT Do sit down, Aunt.

ROSEMONDE No, I must try to find Monsieur le Cure. I shan't be long, but I do want to tell him about this before he leaves, he'll be so pleased.

MME DE ROSEMONDE *bustles out of the room, and a long silence ensues.*

MME DE TOURVEL *makes a renewed and determined effort to get to grips with her tapestry; VALMONT finds a chair facing her, watches and waits. The light is beginning to die. Finally, MME DE TOURVEL, struggling for composure, feels compelled to break the silence.*

TOURVEL I can't understand how someone whose instincts are so generous could lead such a dissolute life.

VALMONT I'm afraid you have an exaggerated idea both of my generosity and of my depravity. If I knew who'd given you such a dire account of me, I might be able to defend myself; since I don't, let me make a confession: I'm afraid the key to the paradox lies in a certain weakness of character.

TOURVEL I don't see how so thoughtful an act of charity could be described as weak.

VALMONT This appalling reputation of mine, you see, there is some justification for it. I've spent my life surrounded by immoral people; I've allowed myself to be influenced by them and sometimes even taken pride in outshining them. Whereas, in this case, I've simply fallen under a quite opposite kind of influence: yours.

TOURVEL You mean you wouldn't have done it...?

VALMONT Not without your example, no. It was by way of an innocent tribute to your goodness.

There's a pause, during which MME DE TOURVEL, uncertain how to react, abandons her tapestry, hovers indecisively for a second and then sits, perching on the edge of a chaise-longue.

You see how weak I am? I promised myself I was never going to tell you. It's just, looking at you...

TOURVEL Monsieur.

VALMONT You needn't worry, I have no illicit intentions, I wouldn't dream of insulting you. But I do love you. I adore you. *(He's across the room in an instant, drops to one knee in front of her and takes her hands in his)* Please help me!

MME DE TOURVEL *wrenches her hands free and bursts into tears.*

What is it?

TOURVEL I'm so unhappy! *(She buries her face in her hands, sobbing)*

For an instant, a shadow of a smile twitches across VALMONT's face, before he speaks in a voice on the edge of tears.

VALMONT But why?

TOURVEL Will you leave me now?

VALMONT *rises and moves away across the room, ostensibly making an effort to control himself.*

VALMONT I shouldn't have said anything, I know I shouldn't, I'm sorry. But really, you have nothing to fear. Nothing at all. Tell me what to do, show me how to behave, I'll do anything you say.

MME DE TOURVEL *manages to control herself and looks up at him.*

TOURVEL I thought the least I could hope for was that you would respect me.

VALMONT But I do, of course I do!

TOURVEL Then forget all this, don't say another word, you've offended me deeply, it's unforgivable.

VALMONT I thought you might at least give me some credit for being honest.

TOURVEL On the contrary, this confirms everything I've been told about you. I'm beginning to think you may well have planned the whole exercise.

VALMONT When I came to visit my aunt, I had no idea you were here: not that it would have disturbed me in the slightest if I had known. You see, up until then, I'd only ever experienced desire. Love, never.

TOURVEL That's enough.

VALMONT No, no, you made an accusation, you must allow me the opportunity to defend myself. Now, you were there when my aunt asked me to stay a little longer, and at that time I only agreed in deference to her, although I was already by no means unaware of your beauty.

TOURVEL Monsieur...

VALMONT No, the point is, all this has nothing to do with your beauty. As I got to know you, I began to realize that beauty is the least of your qualities. I became fascinated by your goodness, I was drawn in by it, I didn't understand what was happening to me, and it was only when I began to feel actual physical pain every time you left the room, that it finally dawned on me: I was in love, for the first time in my life. I knew it was hopeless, of course, but that didn't matter to me, because it wasn't like it always had been, it wasn't that I wanted to have you, no. All I wanted was to deserve you.

MME DE TOURVEL *rises decisively to her feet.*

TOURVEL I really will have to leave you. Monsieur, you seem determined to persist with a line of argument you must know I ought not to listen to and I don't want to hear.

VALMONT No, no, please, sit down, sit down. I've already told you, I'll do anything you say.

Silence. They watch each other. Eventually, MME DE TOURVEL sits down again.

TOURVEL There's only one thing I would like you to do for me.

VALMONT What? What is it?

TOURVEL But I don't see how I can ask you, I'm not even sure if I want to put myself in the position of being beholden to you.

VALMONT Oh, please, no, I insist, if you're good enough to give me an opportunity to do something you want, anything, it's I who will be beholden to you.

MME DE TOURVEL looks at VALMONT for a moment with characteristic openness.

TOURVEL Very well, then. I would like you to leave this house.

There flashes momentarily across VALMONT's face the expression of a chess champion who has just lost his queen.

VALMONT I don't see why that should be necessary.

TOURVEL Let's just say you've spent your life making it necessary.

By now, VALMONT has recovered his equilibrium; and thought very fast.

VALMONT Well then, of course, whatever you say. I couldn't possibly refuse you.

It's MME DE TOURVEL's turn to be surprised.

Will you allow me to give my aunt, say, twenty-four hours' notice?

TOURVEL Well, yes, naturally.

VALMONT I shall find something in my mail tomorrow morning which obliges me to return at once to Paris.

TOURVEL Thank you, I'd be very grateful.

VALMONT Perhaps I might be so bold as to ask a favour in return.

MME DE TOURVEL frowns, hesitating.

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