

## 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.*

ROSEMONDE  
to us.

TOURVEL To

VALMONT O

TOURVEL No

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VALMONT V

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MERTEUIL I'll see what I can do: now, Vicomte, the screen.

VALMONT *starts moving towards it, then hesitates.*

VALMONT Are you sure I shouldn't confront her? Give her some evidence for those rude letters?

MERTEUIL Quick.

VALMONT *moves swiftly and is only just behind the screen in time not to be seen by MME DE VOLANGES, as she's shown in by the MAJOR-DOMO.*

MERTEUIL, *who has assumed a grave expression, rises to greet MME DE VOLANGES, kissing her on both cheeks,*

VOLANGES Your note said it was urgent...

MERTEUIL It's days now, I haven't been able to think about anything else, I couldn't decide what to do for the best. Finally I saw there was no escaping the fact it was my plain duty to tell you. Please sit down.

MME DE VOLANGES, *now decidedly uneasy, does so, as MERTEUIL paces to and fro, looking anguished.*

As you know, in recent weeks, Cécile has been kind enough to accept my friendship and, I believe, bestow on me her own.

VOLANGES Yes, of course, she's devoted to you.

MERTEUIL This is what makes this duty doubly difficult to perform.

VOLANGES This has something to do with Cécile?

MERTEUIL I may be wrong; I pray Heaven I am.

MERTEUIL *pauses again; by now, MME DE VOLANGES is thoroughly alarmed.*

VOLANGES Go on.

MERTEUIL *takes a deep breath.*

MERTEUIL I have reason to believe that a, how can I describe it, a dangerous liaison has sprung up between your daughter and the Chevalier Danceny.

*Silence. MME DE VOLANGES is dumbfounded and so, should he be visible behind the screen, is VALMONT. But it takes only a few seconds for MME DE VOLANGES to recover her equilibrium.*

VOLANGES No, no, that's completely absurd. Cécile is still a child, she understands nothing of these things; and Danceny is an entirely respectable young man.

MERTEUIL If you were to be right, no one would be happier than I.

VOLANGES Naturally, they've never been together unchaperoned, generally by me and often by you.

MERTEUIL Precisely, that's when I first formed the impression that something was passing between them: the way they looked at each other.

VOLANGES I'm sure it's merely their feeling for the music.

MERTEUIL Perhaps so. But there was one other thing. Tell me, does Cécile have a great many correspondents?

VOLANGES She writes, I suppose, an average number of letters. Relatives, friends from the convent... Why?

MERTEUIL I went into her room at the beginning of this week, I simply knocked and entered without waiting for a reply, and she was stuffing a letter into the left-hand drawer of her bureau, in which, I couldn't help noticing, there seemed to be a large number of similar letters.

*Silence. Then MME DE VOLANGES rises to her feet.*

VOLANGES I'm most grateful to you. I'll see myself out.

MERTEUIL I hope you don't think me interfering.

VOLANGES Not at all.

MERTEUIL And do I hope, if, God forbid, you do discover anything compromising, you won't tell Cécile it was I who was responsible. I would hate to forfeit her trust, and if there is to be a period of difficulty, I would like to think my advice might be of some use to her.

VOLANGES Of course.

MERTEUIL rings. MME DE VOLANGES stands there, still in a state of mild shock.

MERTEUIL Would you think it impertinent if I were to make another suggestion?

VOLANGES No, no.

MERTEUIL If my recollection is correct, I overheard you saying to the Vicomte de Valmont that his aunt had invited you to stay at her château.

VOLANGES She has, yes, repeatedly.

MERTEUIL A spell in the country might be the very thing until all this blows over.

VOLANGES If what you tell me has any truth in it, I may very well send her back to the convent.

MERTEUIL Wouldn't it be better to threaten that as a punishment if there's any resumption of relations?

VOLANGES Perhaps. I can't believe you're right about this.

MERTEUIL Let's hope not.

*The MAJOR-DOMO arrives and MERTEUIL beckons him over, MME DE VOLANGES meanwhile is lost in thought. She looks up, frowning.*

VOLANGES Isn't the Vicomte staying there at the moment?

MERTEUIL I understand he's returned to Paris. *(She embraces MME DE VOLANGES warmly)* I expect I've imagined the whole thing and tomorrow we'll be able to laugh at my stupidity. If so, I hope you'll be able to forgive me.

VOLANGES My dear, I shall always be more than grateful for your concern. *(They part)*

MME DE VOLANGES *moves slowly out of the room, bowed down with care, following the MAJOR-DOMO.*

*Because of her progress, VALMONT emerges from behind the screen before she's disappeared, to MERTEUIL's alarm. But MME DE VOLANGES doesn't look back and VALMONT can't resist making faces at her retreating back, causing MERTEUIL to hiss at him.*

MERTEUIL Stop it.

VALMONT So, you understand I've returned to Paris?

MERTEUIL You asked for hindrances.

VALMONT You're a genuinely wicked woman.

MERTEUIL And you wanted a chance to make my cousin suffer.

VALMONT I can't resist you.

MERTEUIL I've made it easy for you.

VALMONT But all this is most inconvenient: the Comtesse de Beaulieu has invited me to stay.

MERTEUIL Well, you'll have to put her off.

VALMONT The Comtesse has promised me extensive use of her gardens. It seems her husband's fingers are not as green as they once were.

MERTEUIL Maybe not. But from what I hear, all his friends are gardeners.

VALMONT Is that so?

MERTEUIL You want your revenge: I want my revenge. I'm afraid there's really only one place you can go.

VALMONT Back to Auntie, eh?

MERTEUIL Back to Auntie. Where you can also pursue that other matter. You have some evidence to procure, have you not?

*CÉCILE smiles uncertainly and puts the key away. She stands there, obviously racked with indecision.*

And now I suggest you rejoin your mama and the others before they send out a search party.

*CÉCILE* Yes, Monsieur. Thank you, Monsieur.

*CÉCILE turns and hurries back into the garden with her shawl.*

*VALMONT watches her go, thoughtful.*

*VALMONT* My pleasure. *(He moves over to an armchair and sinks into it, picks up a book from the arm of the chair, finds his place and settles to read)*

*The lights change. It's early evening now.*

*VALMONT, still reading, looks up as MME DE TOURVEL comes into the room. She freezes as soon as she sees VALMONT, who puts down his book and rises to his feet.*

I trust you're feeling a little better, Madame.

*TOURVEL* If I had felt ill, Monsieur, it would not be difficult to guess who was responsible.

*VALMONT* You can't mean me. Do you?

*TOURVEL* You promised to leave here.

*VALMONT* And I did.

*TOURVEL* Then how can you be insensitive enough to return uninvited and without warning?

*VALMONT* I find myself obliged to attend to some urgent business in the area: in which, moreover, my aunt is crucially involved.

*TOURVEL* I only hope it can be dealt with promptly.

*MME DE TOURVEL cautiously moves closer to the centre of the room. As the conversation continues, VALMONT*



*contrives, imperceptibly, to manoeuvre himself between her and the door.*

VALMONT Why are you so angry with me?

TOURVEL I'm not angry. Although, since you gave me a solemn undertaking not to offend me when you wrote and then in your very first letter spoke of nothing but the disorders of love, I'm certainly entitled to be.

VALMONT I was away almost three weeks and wrote to you only three times. Since I was quite unable to think about anything but you, some might say I showed heroic restraint.

TOURVEL Not in so far as you persisted in writing about your love, despite my pleas for you not to do so.

VALMONT It's true: I couldn't find the strength to obey you.

TOURVEL You claim to think there's some connection between what you call love and happiness: I can't believe that there is.

VALMONT In these circumstances, I agree. When the love is unrequited...

TOURVEL As it must be. You know it's impossible for me to reciprocate your feelings; and even if I did, it could only cause me suffering, without making you any the happier.

VALMONT But what else could I have written to you about, other than my love? What else is there? I believe I've done everything you've asked of me.

TOURVEL You've done nothing of the sort.

VALMONT I left here when you wanted me to.

TOURVEL And you came back.

*Silence, as VALMONT searches for a way forward, momentarily at a loss.*

I've offered you my friendship, Monsieur. It's the only thing I can give you: why can't you accept it?

VALMONT I could pretend to: but that would be dishonest.

TOURVEL You're not answering my question.

VALMONT The man I used to be would have been content with friendship; and set about trying to turn it to his advantage. But I've changed now: and I can't conceal from you that I love you tenderly, passionately and above all, respectfully. So how am I to demote myself to the tepid position of friend?

*VALMONT's strategy has paid off, because at this moment MME DE TOURVEL decides to leave the room and finds the way blocked.*

And in any case, you're no longer even pretending to show friendship.

TOURVEL What do you mean?

VALMONT Well, is this friendly?

TOURVEL You can hardly expect me to stay here and listen to the expression of sentiments you know very well I can only find insulting.

VALMONT I think you're misunderstanding me: I know you can bestow on me nothing more than your friendship, for which, by the way, I'm profoundly grateful. In the same way, I can feel nothing less for you than love. We both know this is the true position: can't we simply acknowledge it? I don't see why recognition of the truth should lose me your friendship. Openness and honesty scarcely deserve to be punished, don't you agree?

TOURVEL You are adept, Monsieur, at framing questions which preclude the answer no. Your honesty or otherwise is not at issue. The point is, surely, that I was weak enough to be persuaded to grant you a favour you should never have obtained; and furthermore I did this under certain conditions, not a single one of which you have observed. Naturally, I feel you've exploited my good faith.

VALMONT What can I say to reassure you? How can you be afraid of me when, because I love you, your happiness is

far more important to me than my own? You've made me a better person: you mustn't now undo your handiwork.

TOURVEL I've no wish to: but I must ask whether you're going to leave the room or let me pass.

VALMONT But why?

TOURVEL Because I find this conversation distressing. I can't seem to make you understand what I mean; and I've no wish to hear what you invariably get round to saying.

VALMONT Very well, I shall leave you in possession of the field.

TOURVEL Thank you.

VALMONT But look: I shall expedite my business, as you ask. But we are to be living under the same roof, at least for a few days; could we not contrive to tolerate it when fate throws us together? Surely we don't have to try to avoid each other?

*Silence. VALMONT waits.*

TOURVEL Of course not. Providing you adhere to my few simple rules.

VALMONT I shall obey you in this as in everything. I wish you knew me well enough to recognize how much you've changed me. My friends in Paris remarked on it at once. I've become the soul of consideration, charitable, conscientious, more celibate than a monk...

TOURVEL More celibate?

VALMONT Well, you know, the stories one hears in Paris. *(pause)* It's all due to your influence, I have you to thank for it. And now, good evening. *(He bows deep and turns away, begins moving towards the door)*

TOURVEL Monsieur...?

VALMONT What?

MME DE TOURVEL looks at VALMONT for a moment, troubled; then shakes her head.

TOURVEL Nothing.

VALMONT *turns away, permits himself a private smile and leaves.*

MME DE TOURVEL *stands for a long time, not moving, locked in some personal struggle.*

## Scene Seven

*The following day, 1st October. The low afternoon sun slants in through the windows of the salon in MME DE ROSEMONDE's château.*

*At first, the room is empty: then CÉCILE appears, arm-in-arm with MME DE MERTEUIL, who seems almost to be supporting her. CÉCILE looks exhausted and distraught; MERTEUIL, solicitous.*

MERTEUIL. My dear, I really can't help you unless you tell me what's troubling you.

CÉCILE. I can't, I just can't.

MERTEUIL. I thought we'd agreed not to keep any secrets from one another.

CÉCILE. I'm so unhappy.

*CÉCILE bursts into tears. MERTEUIL takes her in her arms and soothes her mechanically, her expression, as long as it's not seen by CÉCILE, bored and impatient.*

Everything's gone wrong since the day Maman found Danceny's letters.

MERTEUIL. Yes, that was very stupid of you. How could you have let that happen?

CÉCILE. Someone must have told her, she went straight to my bureau and opened the drawer I was keeping them in.

MERTEUIL. Who could have done such a thing?

CÉCILE. It must have been my chambermaid...

MERTEUIL. Or your confessor perhaps?

CÉCILE. Oh, no, surely not.

MERTEUIL. You can't always trust those people, my dear.

CÉCILE. That's terrible.

MERTEUIL. But today, what is the matter today?

CÉCILE. You'll be angry with me.

MERTEUIL. Are you sure you don't want me to be angry with you?

CÉCILE *looks up at MERTEUIL, surprised by the acuteness of this idea.*

Come along.

CÉCILE. I don't know how to speak the words.

MERTEUIL. Perhaps I am beginning to get angry.

MERTEUIL *has spoken quietly; and now there's a long silence. Finally, CÉCILE takes a deep breath.*

CÉCILE. Last night...

MERTEUIL. Yes.

CÉCILE. So that we could exchange letters to and from Danceny without arousing suspicions, I gave Monsieur de Valmont the key to my bedroom...

MERTEUIL. Yes.

CÉCILE. And last night he used it. I thought he'd just come to bring me a letter. But he hadn't. And by the time I realized what he had come for, it was, well, it was too late to stop him...

CÉCILE *bursts into tears again; but this time MERTEUIL doesn't take her in her arms. Instead, she considers her coolly for a moment before speaking.*

MERTEUIL. You mean to tell me you're upset because Monsieur de Valmont has taught you something you've undoubtedly been dying to learn?

CÉCILE *'s tears are cut off and she looks up in shock.*

CÉCILE. What?

MERTEUIL. And am I to understand that what generally brings a girl to her senses has deprived you of yours?

CÉCILE I thought you'd be horrified.

MERTEUIL Tell me: you resisted him, did you?

CÉCILE Of course I did, as much as I could.

MERTEUIL But he forced you?

CÉCILE It wasn't that exactly, but I found it almost impossible to defend myself.

MERTEUIL Why was that? Did he tie you up?

CÉCILE No, no, but he has a way of putting things, you just can't think of an answer.

MERTEUIL Not even no?

CÉCILE I kept saying no, all the time: but somehow that wasn't what I was doing. And in the end...

MERTEUIL Yes?

CÉCILE I told him he could come back tonight.

*Silence. CÉCILE seems, once again, trembling on the edge of tears.*

I'm so ashamed.

MERTEUIL You'll find the shame is like the pain: you only feel it once.

CÉCILE And this morning it was terrible. As soon as I saw Maman, I couldn't help it, I burst into tears.

MERTEUIL I'm surprised you missed the opportunity to bring the whole thing to a rousing climax by confessing all. You wouldn't be worrying about tonight if you'd done that; you'd be packing your bags for the convent.

CÉCILE What am I going to do?

MERTEUIL You really want my advice?

CÉCILE Please.

MERTEUIL *considers a moment.*

**MERTEUIL.** Allow Monsieur de Valmont to continue your instruction. Convince your mother you have forgotten Danceny. And raise no objection to the marriage.

**CÉCILE** *gapes at MERTEUIL, bewildered.*

**CÉCILE** With Monsieur de Gercourt?

**MERTEUIL** When it comes to marriage one man is as good as the next; and even the least accommodating is less trouble than a mother.

**CÉCILE** But what about Danceny?

**MERTEUIL.** He seems patient enough; and once you're married, you should be able to see him without undue difficulty.

**CÉCILE** I thought you once said to me, I'm sure you did, one evening at the Opéra, that once I was married, I would have to be faithful to my husband.

**MERTEUIL** Your mind must have been wandering, you must have been listening to the Opéra.

**CÉCILE** So, are you saying I'm going to have to do that with three different men?

**MERTEUIL** I'm saying, you stupid little girl, that provided you take a few elementary precautions, you can do it, or not, with as many men as you like, as often as you like, in as many different ways as you like. Our sex has few enough advantages, you may as well make the most of those you have. Now here comes your mama, so remember what I've said and, above all, no more snivelling.

**CÉCILE** Yes, Madame.

*And by now, MME DE VOLANGES is more or less upon them.*

*She acknowledges MERTEUIL perfunctorily, but her anxious attention is directed almost entirely towards CÉCILE, whose expression is now profoundly thoughtful.*



VALMONT *watches her go, then turns back to grin at MERTEUIL.*

VALMONT You see, she can hardly bear to be in the same room with me.

MERTEUIL But I gather you've had your revenge. Well done.

VALMONT So you know?

MERTEUIL The little one could hardly wait to tell me.

VALMONT A favourable report, I trust?

MERTEUIL On the contrary, Vicomte, if I hadn't spoken to her sharply, I think on your next visit you'd have found her door bolted as well as locked.

VALMONT You surprise me. I was malicious enough to use no more strength than could easily be resisted.

MERTEUIL Still, for some reason she seems to think it was rather an underhand approach.

VALMONT I'd been postponing it, to tell you the truth. But when I heard you were expected today, I wanted to be able to afford you some amusement at least.

MERTEUIL It's just as well I did decide to look in, because, as it turns out, your initiative came within an ace of sabotaging our whole plan.

VALMONT What do you mean?

MERTEUIL Madame de Volanges was so concerned about Cécile's appearance this morning, she resolved to allow her to marry Danceny after all.

VALMONT No.

MERTEUIL I think I've been able to talk her out of it: but the fact remains, you almost lost us our revenge on Gercourt.

VALMONT I could hardly be expected to anticipate this sudden access of compassion. After all, to my knowledge, Mother Volanges has never shown signs of it before.

MERTEUIL I'm beginning to have my doubts about you, Vicomte. Do you really deserve your reputation? You see, the real reason I consented to spend a night at this lugubrious address was that I was hoping to be shown some tear-stained bit of paper.

VALMONT Ah.

MERTEUIL But I can only assume from what you've been saying that no such document exists.

VALMONT No.

MERTEUIL Probably just as well, no doubt you're exhausted after last night's exertions.

VALMONT I think you know me better than that.

MERTEUIL Well, I wonder. Can you account for this extraordinary dilatoriness?

VALMONT Lugubrious or not, I haven't experienced a moment's boredom in all the weeks I've spent here. I appreciate you may have excellent reasons for your impatience, but you mustn't try to deprive me of my simple pleasures. I've explained to you before how much I enjoy watching the battle between love and virtue.

MERTEUIL What concerns me is that you appear to enjoy watching it more than you used to enjoy winning it.

VALMONT All in good time.

MERTEUIL The century is drawing to its close, Vicomte.

VALMONT It's true that she's resisted me for more than two months now; and that's very nearly a record. But I really don't want to hurry things. We go for walks together almost every day: a little further every time down the path that has no turning. She's accepted my love; I've accepted her friendship; we're both aware how little there is to choose between them. Her eyes are closing. Every step she tries to take away from the inevitable conclusion brings her a

little nearer to it. Hopes and fears, passion and suspense: even if you were in the theatre, what more could you ask?

MERTEUIL. An audience?

VALMONT. But you: you're my audience. And when Gercourt is married and Madame de Tourvel eventually collapses, we shall tell everyone, shall we not? And the story will spread much faster than the plot of the latest play; and I've no doubt it will be much better received.

MERTEUIL. I hope you're right, Vicomte, I wish I could share your confidence.

VALMONT. I'm only sorry our agreement does not relate to the task you set me rather than the task I set myself.

MERTEUIL. I am grateful, of course; but that would have been almost insultingly simple. One does not applaud the tenor for clearing his throat.

VALMONT. You're right, how could one possibly compare them...  
(He breaks off)

MME DE ROSEMONDE enters, followed by MME DE TOURVEL.

MME DE ROSEMONDE bustles over to MERTEUIL to embrace her: MERTEUIL responds convincingly, but it's clear she has immediately registered the look which passes between VALMONT and MME DE TOURVEL, a look that indicates that there has indeed been some progress in their relationship.

ROSEMONDE. I'm so delighted you could manage to visit us, my dear, even if only for such a short time.

MERTEUIL. I wish I could stay longer, Madame, but my husband's estate...

ROSEMONDE. Do you know, I was thinking yesterday, it's more than five years since you were last here, with your dear