FENWICK ELIZA

SECRESY; OR, RUIN ON THE ROCK

Eliza Fenwick

Secresy; or, Ruin on the Rock

Fenwick E.

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Содержание

E. Fenwick
Secresy; or, Ruin on the Rock

Disguise! I see thou art a Wickedness,
Wherein the pregnant Enemy does much.

Shakespeare

ELIZA B —

What does the world care about either you or me? Nothing. But we care for each other, and I grasp at every opportunity of telling it. A letter, they may say, would do as well for that purpose as a dedication. I say no; for a letter is a sort of corruptible substance, and these volumes *may* be IMMORTAL. Beside, it is perhaps my pride to write a dedication and your pride to receive one. I desire the world then to let it pass; for, to tell them a truth – you have paid me for it before-hand.

VOLUME I

LETTER I
FROM CAROLINE ASHBURN TO THE HONOURABLE GEORGE VALMONT

SIR,

I am by no means indifferent as to the opinion you may form of me, in consequence of my abrupt, and, in a degree, rude conduct, when you so peremptorily denied the boon I would have begged on quitting your castle. If the reasons which guided your refusal were such as fully satisfied yourself, however incompetent they might be in my judgment, I was wrong in being offended, and in showing my resentment by something like invective. Ere we had travelled two miles I became sensible of my pride and injustice; and it is from our first resting place I thus present myself to acknowledge my fault, to ask other favors, and to tell you that I have no pleasure in view equal to that I expected to enjoy in the society of Miss Valmont.

But though you denied me the charm of associating with your niece, you will not also refuse me her correspondence? A letter, Sir, cannot waft down your draw-bridges; the spirit of my affection breathed therein cannot disenchant her from the all-powerful spell of your authority. No. And you surely will not forbid an indulgence so endearing to us, while unimportant to yourself. Already I feel assured of your consent; and, with my thanks, dismiss the subject.

As your seclusion of Miss Valmont from the world is not a plan of yesterday, I imagine you are persuaded of its value and propriety, and I therefore see nothing which should deter me from indulging the strong propensity I feel to enquire into the nature of your system; a system so opposite to the general practice of mankind, and which I am inclined to think is not as perfect as you are willing to suppose. Remembering your contempt of the female character, I am aware that you may possibly treat this part of my letter only with neglect or disdain. Gladly would I devise a means by which to induce you to lay aside this prejudice against us, and in the language of reason, as from one being to another, discuss with me the merits or defects of your plan; which from its singularity, on the first view, excited my curiosity; and has since, from my observation of some of its consequences, interested me by worthier feelings than that of mere curiosity. If Miss Valmont's education, treatment, and utter seclusion were most valuable for her, why should she, yet so young, and removed from the common misfortunes of life, why should she be unhappy. You, Sir, may not have perceived this effect of your system; for, although shut within the same boundary and resident under one roof, you seldom see her, and when you do see, you do not study her. I believe I know more of her mental temperament in our seven days intercourse than you have learned in seven years, and I affirm that she is unhappy. Yet it is only from her sudden wanderings in conversation, and that apparent restlessness of dissatisfaction in her, which seeks change of place because of all places alike are irksome, that I ground my opinion, for having flattered myself that you would permit her to accompany me from your castle, I passed the days of my abode there, in closely observing Miss Valmont, rather than in endeavouring to gain her entire confidence; and have perhaps made but little progress toward obtaining a friendship, to which my heart aspires with zeal and affection.

In the hope of a speedy and candid answer from you,

I remain, Sir,
Your well wisher,
And humble servant,
CAROLINE ASHBURN

LETTER II
FROM SIBELLA VALMONT TO CAROLINE ASHBURN

I am come from Mr. Valmont's study. – Can it be? – Oh yes! I am come from Mr. Valmont's presence, to write a letter – a letter to you! – Ah, Miss Ashburn! – to write a letter to you by my uncle's – Can command ever be indulgence? – No, no. I will not believe that: – No, not even would I believe it, though, when my heart expands with swelling emotion, he were then also to command me to – . Miss Ashburn, the command of Mr. Valmont in this, as in all other instances, is stern and repulsive, but, as his commands are odious to my acceptation, so, in equal degree, is the action of writing a letter to you grateful, delightful, overwhelming!

How came it? – How have you prevailed? – Oh teach me your art to soften his power, to unloose the grasp of his authority, and I will love you as – I believe I cannot love you better than I do; for have you not cast a ray of cheering light upon my dungeon? – Have you not bestowed upon me the only charm of existence that I have known for many and many a tedious day?

But why did you do so? Do you love me as I love you? You never told me so. Seven days and seven nights you lived in our castle; and you walked with me by day, you wandered with me by night. I talked to you almost without ceasing. – You spoke infinitely less than I did. – You pressed my hand as it held yours: but you never said, *I love you! – I love you, Sibella, with all my soul.*– Nor did you ever quit your rest, amidst the darkness of the night, to hover near my chamber, as I have done near yours. – Yes, Miss Ashburn, when at night you had retired from me, I beheld only solitude and imprisonment; and I have waited hours in that forlorn gallery, that I might catch the whisper of your breathings, that the consciousness of being near a friend might restore me to hope, to hilarity, to confidence.

Yet now I recollect it, and you do love me; for you asked the imperious, the denying Mr. Valmont, to let you take me from the castle. Oh, you did urge – you did intreat. – You do love me. – I am writing a letter to you; and perhaps, one day, I shall have all my happiness.

I wish Mr. Valmont would show me the letter you wrote to him. He has charged me to answer it, and I have been obliged to walk a great while, and to think a great deal, before I could remember a word of what he said I was to repeat to you; and now I do not think I recollect the whole. I would return to his study and ask him to tell it me again; but he has an aversion to trouble, and perhaps, irritated by my forgetfulness, might say, I should not write to you at all. – Ah, if he were to say that, Miss Ashburn, and if it were possible for me to send a letter out of the castle in defiance of his commands, do you think I would obey him? – No, no.

Andrew came to me in the wood, to bid me attend my uncle in his library; and I went thither immediately. He was but just risen; and a letter, which I suppose was your letter, and which must have arrived yesterday, was laying open on the table beside him; and when he spoke to me he laid his right hand upon the letter.

'Numberless are the hours, child,' Mr. Valmont said to me soon after I entered, 'that I have employed in pondering on your welfare: – yet you are not the docile and grateful creature I expected to find you.'

'Sir,' I said, 'if in all those hours of pondering you never thought of the only means by which my welfare can be effected, am I therefore forbidden to be happy? – Am I to be unhappy, because I and not you discovered how I might be very, very happy?'

Mr. Valmont raised himself more erect on his chair; and he frowned too. 'Always reasoning,' he said: 'I tell you, child, you cannot, you shall not reason. Repine in secret as much as you please, but no reasonings. No matter how sullen the submission, if it is submission.'

I replied, 'I do not think as you do.'

'Child, you are not born to think; you were not made to think.' He turned the letter on the table, as he spoke, and took a leaning attitude.

'But I cannot – .'

'Silence, Sibella!' cried my uncle. He fiercely recovered his upright posture; and then, for I was effectually silenced, he gradually and slowly fell back into his reclining station. Indeed, Miss Ashburn, I am in some instances still a mere child, as Mr. Valmont calls me; and yet, I wish you would account for it, for I do not know how, I feel every day bolder and bolder. I can speak to him when I first meet him, as calmly as I can to Andrew; and I can oppose him a little. And when I have not opposed him as much as I wish to do, and have ran away from the fight of his face, and the sound of his voice, I take myself to talk, and say, foolish Sibella! Can a frown kill you? – Can your uncle, though he should be tenfold angry with you, do more to you than he has already done? And, when my throbbing heart denies the possibility of that, I resolve the next time to tell him every thing I feel: and then I wait, and long, and wish that the next time would arrive. When it does arrive, I begin without fear; or, at least, I have only a weak trembling, which I should soon lose, if he did not call up one of those frowns which infallibly condemn me to silence and to terror. But I know, and he knows too if he would but own it, that I do think; that I was born to think: – and I will think.

Oh dear, dear Miss Ashburn, I am writing a letter to you! And what was it but my power of thought, which gave birth to that affection which would impel me on with a rapidity that my pen cannot follow? It seems to me that my thought dictates volumes in an instant; and that, in an instant, I have said volumes. Yet I have only a few pages of paper under my eye and my hand. If Mr. Valmont tells me, I cannot cut the air with wings, I will answer – 'Tis true: but in imagination, I can encompass the vast globe in a second. Hail thought! Thought the soul of existence! – Not think! – why do not all forms in which the pulse of life vibrates, possess the power of thought? – Have I not seen the worm, crawling from his earthy bed to drink the new-fallen dew from the grass, swiftly shrink back to his shelter, his attentive ear alarmed by my approach? – The very insect, while sporting in the rapture of a sun-beam on my habit, is yet wary and vigilant, and will rather leave his half-tasted enjoyment, if apprehension seize him, than hazard the possibility of my inflicting injury upon him. And what but thought, imperceptible yet mighty thought, could make a creature so infinitely diminutive in its proportions, so apparently valueless in the creation, shun the hand of power, and seek for itself sources of enjoyment? – I could tell you, Miss Ashburn, how I have imagined I met sympathy and reflection in that flower which enamoured of the sun mourns throughout the term of his absence, droops on her stalk, and shuts her bosom to the gloom and darkness which succeeds, nor bursts again into vigour and beauty till cheered by his all inspiring return. It is not for you, happy you, who live with liberty, live as free to indulge as to form your wishes, I say it is not for you to find tongues in the wind. It is for the imprisoned Sibella to feed on such illusions, to waft herself on the pinions of fancy beyond Mr. Valmont's barriers, within which, for the two last years, her fetters have been insupportable: – for two years, except when she saw you, has she been joyless. I could talk of those two years: but then I should want also to tell you, Miss Ashburn, of the previous hours, the days, the months, the years that came, that smiled, and passed away.

I wonder if I should tire you? Surely I think not: yet I have already written much, and I have also my uncle's words to deliver. – Ah! to quit such a theme for my uncle!

I told you, Mr. Valmont silenced me by his frowns. He was some time silent himself. He took the letter from off the table, and appeared to read parts of it at length he said, 'Miss Ashburn has very properly apologized for her behaviour to me the morning she went hence. Doubtless, child, you also were much disappointed, that I did not consent to your going with her and her mother.'

'No, sir.'

'No!' my uncle said, seemingly surprised; 'and why not?'

'Because I did not expect you would suffer me to go.'

'Methinks it was a mighty natural expectation.' My uncle looked angry. He presently added. 'Did you wish to go with them, child?'

'O yes, sir, I did indeed wish!'

'It was natural enough, Sibella, that you should wish for such an indulgence;' and he said this very mildly: 'but I alone am capable of judging of its propriety. Miss Ashburn, I believe, has been little used to disappointment. I pity her. Perhaps a miserable old age is in store for her.'

'Impossible!' I exclaimed; but the exclamation was swift and low; and my uncle, absorbed in contemplating his own designs, did not hear me.

And at last he told me, after many pauses, many slow speeches, that you may write letters to me, and that I shall write letters to you.

I would have kissed him, for I had seized his hand, but his eye spoke no encouragement; and I sat down again to glow, and to tremble.

Part of what followed has escaped me, as I feared it would. I remember that my uncle said, 'Tell Miss Ashburn from me, Sibella, that, like all other females, she has decided with more haste than judgment.'

Thus much for Mr. Valmont. And now for myself, Miss Ashburn; – no, dear Caroline, adieu!

SIBELLA VALMONT

LETTER III
FROM CAROLINE ASHBURN TO SIBELLA VALMONT

Thankful to Mr. Valmont for his consent to my request, and more and more endeared to you, my Sibella, by the joy with which you receive his consent, I am impatient till I have explained the motives that withheld me, while in the woods of Valmont, from saying – '*I love you: – I love you, Sibella, with all my soul.*' To have these motives fully understood by you, it is necessary I should made a sketch of my education, the incidents of my life, and their consequent effect upon my character. Yet I know you will continue to read with avidity. Ask yourself if the ear of affection is easily satiated with the communications of a friend, and wonder that you should have repressed your wishes, when they incited you to unfold to me, with minute attention, the feelings of your heart. The breaks, the allusions in your letter, led me for a time into the tormenting and silly practice of forming conjectures. Now I have ceased to conjecture; but I have not ceased to be desirous of being admitted to your utmost confidence, to the full participation of your remembrances, whether of joy or of sorrow.

You have seen my mother, Sibella, but people of a superior class must have superior forms; and the endearing name of mother is banished for the cold title of ceremony. Mrs. Ashburn, as I am now tutored to call her, was the very fashionable daughter of very fashionable parents, who died when she had attained the age of twenty-three, and left her in possession of the most aspiring longings after splendor and dissipation, but destitute of every means for their gratification. Among the many friends who came to pity or advise, one offered her his assistance. His proposal was abrupt and disgusting, but there was no alternative. He would equip her to go in search of a wealthy marriage among the luxurious inhabitants of India; or, with her other professing friends, he would leave her to the poverty which lay immediately before her. The offer, after little deliberation, was accepted. Rather than be poor, she humbled the pride of her birth and pretensions; she strengthened her nerves for the voyage; and, having safely arrived in India, her recommendations, but above all her personal charms, secured her the addresses of Mr. Ashburn, who, though he was neither young nor attractive, had gold and diamonds in abundance. A very short interval elapsed between the commencement of their acquaintance with each other, and the celebration of their marriage.

After my birth my father bowed to no other idol than me; for, although my father had gained a very handsome wife, and my mother almost the wealthiest of husbands, yet happiness was still at a distance from them. Indolent in the extreme, he abhorred every species of pleasure which required a portion of activity in its pursuit: he equally abhorred solitude; and expected to find, in his wife, a lounging companion; a partaker of his habits; something little differing from a mere automaton. She, on the contrary, was laborious in the pursuits of pleasure and dissipation. She had pride and spirit to maintain her resolution of gratifying her own wishes. He was too idle to remonstrate: and theirs was an union as widely removed from the interruptions of bickerings and jealousies, as from the confidence, esteem, and endearments of affection.

From me then my father expected to gain the satisfaction his marriage had failed to afford; nor were his hopes better founded than heretofore. Admired, adored by him, flattered by his slaves, incited by indulgencies showered upon me without distinction to make demands the most extravagant and unattainable, I oftener tormented my father by my caprice than delighted him by my fondness. But still every species of advice or of restraint was withheld; and I continued fruitful in expedients for the exercise of my power, continued the discontented slave of my own tyranny. Happily for me, I met with an adventure when I was little more than thirteen years of age that wrought miracles upon me.

Near to a seat of my father's, as near as the cottage of poverty dare rise to the palace of opulence, lived the wife and family of a poor industrious European. The blue eyes of one of their children had spoken so submissively once or twice, as she viewed me passing, that I became enamoured of her interesting countenance, and demanded to have her for a playmate. Day after day Nancy came, and

my fondness for her increased daily. If the turbulence of my temper sometimes broke loose in the course of our amusements, I afterward endeavoured, by increased efforts of condescension, to relieve Nancy from the terror my pride or violence had excited; and, to impress her with a strong sense of my attachment to herself, in her presence I affected to be more than commonly overbearing and insolent to those around us, while to her I was attentive and obliging. At length I became resolved to have her wholly at my command; and, without troubling myself to enquire whether or not my father would object to my plan, I rose earlier than usual one morning, and dispatched a messenger for Nancy; and, while he was absent, pleased myself with anticipating what answers she would make, and what joy she would evince, when I should tell her that henceforward she should live with me, and should have as fine clothes, as fine apartments, and as many slaves to obey her as I myself possessed. My messenger returned alone. He told me Nancy was ill. What a disappointment! How insolent, methought, to be ill, when I wanted her more than I had ever wanted her before. And so much did she appear to merit my resentment, that I gave orders she should be forbidden to see me again, and that all the valuable trinkets I had heaped upon her should be taken from her by force, if she would not yield them when demanded. But no sooner were the toys brought into my presence than I relented, sent them back with many additions, and wept while I delivered messages, intreating – that she would be well by the next day. On the morrow, still no Nancy came; and I passed the day in alternate paroxysms of rage and sorrow. The third morning I hastened to the cottage; and the first object I beheld was Nancy blooming as health could make her.

The insolence with which I reproached the mother of Nancy on this occasion may be easily imagined; but I shall relate minutely to you, Sibella, the good woman's answer; I have never forgotten it.

'Miss,' she said, 'I might as well have told the truth at once, for out it must. Nancy is not sick in body, Miss; and if I can help it, she shan't be sick in mind. Your papa is a great rich man, and you will be a great rich lady. You, Miss, who are so high born and so rich, need not care if people do hate you; but my Nancy is a poor child, and will never have a penny that an't of her own earning – she never used to fleer, and flout, and stamp at her little brothers and sisters, as she does since she came to your house, Miss. And so, Miss, as she will never be able to pay folks for saying she is good when she is bad, I, who am her mother, must make her as good as I can. You may be good enough for a great lady; but Nancy will never be a great lady; and, be as angry as you will, Miss, indeed she can't come to your fine house any more.'

Yes, Sibella; she persisted, in defiance of my resentment and its probable consequences, the worthy woman persisted in preserving her child from the infectious example of my vices. Her lesson had awakened in my mind a true sense of my situation; nor could anger or disdain once force me from the painful conviction that people were hired and paid to lavish on me their insincere encomiums. All the instances of attention or kindness I could recollect I believed had been mine only because I was rich and powerful. I imagined I saw lurking hatred and loathing in every eye; and, though I ceased to command, I resented with an acrimony almost past description every effort that was directed towards increasing my pleasures or convenience. These ebulitions of a wounded vanity insensibly wore away, while I considered how much of amendment and happiness was yet in my power; and, at length, I began seriously to remedy the defects which had made me unworthy to be the companion of Nancy; but, ere I had courage to demand again the society of my little friend, her parents had removed to a distant part of the country, and in this instance frustrated the end of my labours. Yet the labour itself had become delightful, and was amply rewarded by the satisfaction betrayed in the eyes of my numerous attendants; but who, however, as I was a great lady and a rich lady, durst not openly rejoice in my amendment. I longed to hear them burst into praises. I almost sickened for the accents of well-earned commendation; but shame of my former unworthiness, and perhaps a remaining degree of pride, withheld me from encouraging such an explanation: and they continued silently to receive the benefits of my reformation.

And now, Sibella, I must bring you back again to my mother, with whom in these years of childhood I have been but little acquainted. She hated children; their noise and prattle and monkey tricks threw her into hysterics. For a few minutes after dinner, I was sometimes admitted, hushed to silence with a profusion of sweetmeats, and dismissed with a kiss or a frown, just as the avocations and pleasures of the day happened to fix her disposition. As I grew older, I was occasionally allowed to sit in her dressing-room, or to take the air with her in the same carriage; and on those occasions I reached the highest pinnacle of her confidence, and used to listen while she poured forth her longing desires to return to England. As I had been frequently disgusted at witnessing the malignant feuds existing among the Europeans resident in the East-Indies, it was easy for her to interest me in the first of her wishes, namely, that my father would return to England. She spoke of this island as of the abode of pleasure. She described an almost innumerable circle of friends, amidst whose society delights would abound. My imagination gave a stronger colouring to her pictures: I indulged the visionary theme till I also panted to become an inhabitant of this climate of peace, joy and felicity.

No sooner had I adopted the project than my father's lethargic indolence gave way to his desire of gratifying my wishes. He vigorously completed the necessary arrangement of his affairs; and we were in daily expectation of quitting India, when he was attacked by the malignant disease of which he died.

My mother was now the uncontrouled mistress of a world of wealth; and, placing her remittances in a proper train, we speedily set sail for our land of promise.

Safely arrived in London, I expected Mrs. Ashburn would instantly fly to the embraces of her friends. But no: a sumptuous house and equipage were first to be prepared; and, while she exulted in preparation, I repined at her want of sympathy for the feelings of those who I imagined were expecting her with fondness and impatience. Alas, Sibella, I had not followed my mother three times into her circles of friendship, ere I discovered that the enjoyments she had looked forward to, during so many years, consisted only of triumphing with superiority of splendor over those who formerly with the same motives had triumphed over her.

Here my enthusiasm in the search of sincere and uniform friendship would have been extinguished; but that my hopes yet rested on Mrs. Valmont. Of Mrs. Valmont my mother had spoken as playmate, schoolmate, and the confidant of juvenile secrets. Separated, said I to myself, near twenty years, what emotions must a first interview produce! The fire of youth in Mrs. Valmont and Mrs. Ashburn will be, for some moments, renewed; and I shall anticipate the effusions of my own heart when it finds a friend.

After exhibiting our pomp at every place of resort in the metropolis, we began our tour; and passed by several invitations to pay our first visit at Valmont castle. What a freezing sensation crept in my veins, as we waited for the raising of your uncle's draw-bridges, as we rolled along his dark avenues! Such gloom, such menacing grandeur brought into my mind a feeling totally opposite to the hilarity, the glow of expectation I had cherished on the journey. Many persons had spoken in my hearing of Mr. Valmont as the most absurd ridiculous misanthrope of his age; but I had not the highest respect for the authorities from which the information was derived, and I had also conceived with much more fancy than judgment of the delights of a life of solitude. I, in my dream, had forgotten the name of Castle, and the ideas associating with the name; my imagination in its reveries had blended elegance and simplicity, nature and art with their most fascinating productions; when, instead of smiling lawns and gay parterres, without, I found moats, walls, and draw-bridges, frowning battlements that looked as uninviting on the friend as threatening on the enemy, turrets all cheerless, all hostile, and discouraging to the wandering stranger. The castle's Gothic magnificence within reminded us at every step of the dignity of the Valmont race; the apartments received their guests without welcome; the domestics were obedient, but neither cheerful nor attentive. Through carved saloons and arched galleries, into which the bright sun of spring can only cast an oblique ray, we were conducted to Mrs. Valmont's dressing-room.

My Sibella, can you not imagine, you hear your aunt mingling complaint and compliment, languor and restlessness, and labouring to interest real sensibility by moans of imaginary disease? Can you not imagine my mother secretly urging her triumphs over the immured Mrs. Valmont, by lamenting the slavery of pleasure to which she herself is perpetually compelled? And can you not see your disappointed, disgusted Caroline Ashburn viewing caresses without warmth, hearkening to professions without sincerity?

Your uncle entered the room for a moment. Appearing to act, to speak, to look according to some rule settled for the hour, I deemed his character too much assumed to be quickly understood. From the solemn pride which sat on his brow, I judged, however, that he was fitted for his castle, and his castle fitted for him.

Here, thought I, in this place and with these people have we promised to remain for seven long days; and I quitted Mrs. Valmont's dressing-room, to search for amusement and variety in the park and surrounding woods.

I must have been devoid of taste and feeling, if in viewing the exquisite scenery of the park, I had not forgotten the gloomy entrance and the dreary building. I found a seat on the margin of that fine sheet of water which is skirted by *your* majestic wood; and I rested there till twilight began to spread itself over the horizon. Who would not, Sibella, although evening had cast its misty shade over the tall trees and impressed an awful serenity on every surrounding object, who would not, I say, like me have ventured into the wood rather than have returned to Mr. and Mrs. Valmont and their castle. I found the paths so admirably contrived in their breaks and windings, that I could not forbid myself to proceed. Every now and then I had an imperfect view of something dark, rugged, and mountainous. On a sudden, I caught a glimpse of a rude pile of stones, seemingly carried to a tremendous height, which as suddenly vanished from my sight, amidst the intercepting branches; a few steps further, it was again before me as a wild ruin tottering on the projecting point of a rock. Silence, solitude, the twilight, the objects filled my mind with a species of melancholy. Fancy had become more predominant than judgment. I slackened my pace: I breathed heavily: when, suddenly turning into a new path that I expected would bring me to the foot of the rock, I beheld a female form, clothed in white, seated at the foot of a large oak. Her hair, unrestrained by either hat or cap, entirely shaded her face as she bowed her head to look on a little fawn, who in the attitude of confidence and affection was laying across her lap.

The names of Wood Nymph, Dryad and Hymadriad, with a confused number of images, arose in my memory; and I was on the point of reverently retreating, but a moment's pause prevented the romance of the fence from thus imposing on my reason, and I resolved to examine whether the face like the form bespoke more of divinity than of mortal.

As I approached nearer, away bounded the fawn – up sprang the nymph. Again, Sibella, I stood still, unknowing whether to fall at your feet or to clasp you in my arms.

Such was our first romantic interview. There was something wild in your air; your language was simple and concise, yet delivered with an impressive eloquence, and I thought you altogether a phenomenon. My heart could not help partaking the transport with which you received my promise of staying with you in the wood. Yet it was to me incomprehensible how you could talk so familiarly of roaming in woods at night, without seeming to know any thing of the ideas of loneliness and apprehension generally supposed to belong to such situations.

But my habits would not so suddenly yield to your's. You saw that the damp and darkness affected me, and you instantly led the way to the castle: but you became silent: you sighed: you walked at a greater distance from me: and I began to fear lest you could only submit to be pleased in your own way. The instant we entered the outer court of the castle you seized my hand; and, having pressed it forcibly to your bosom, you darted through a small side door in the building, and closed it after you. I was going to follow – 'This way, if you please, madam,' said the servant who had been sent to search

for me in the park. 'I will accompany Miss Valmont,' said I. 'Miss Valmont does not see company, madam,' replied the man, 'her uncle does not permit it.'

I suffered myself to be conducted to the supper room, where I related the manner of our meeting, the information you had given me of your relationship to Mr. Valmont; and finally I spoke of the singular way in which you had quitted me, and expressed my surprise at not finding you of the supper party.

Mrs. Valmont said, you were a strange unformed child. Mr. Valmont would gladly have been silent; but, as I continually addressed myself to him, he could not rid himself, without gross rudeness, of the necessity of answering me. He spoke mysteriously of his systems, and his plans, of his authority, his wisdom, and your dependence, of his right of choosing for you, and your positive duty of obeying him without reserve or discussion. At last, with tones and gestures, by which I was to understand that he went to the extreme of condescension in my favour, he consented that, provided no other company came to visit him in the time, you should associate with us while we remained at Valmont castle.

Your very extraordinary seclusion and your extraordinary self, occupied my mind during the greatest part of that night. I had found you highly interesting; and I believed you to be infinitely amiable. I thought I might embrace you as the first choice of my affections; but I doubted whether you might not, if now exposed to the glitter of the world, lose that vigour of feeling which in solitude made you appear so singular, so attractive. I longed to make the experiment, for my hopes of you were stronger than my fears; and, as I had so far prevailed on Mr. Valmont, I flattered myself I should also prevail on him to suffer me to conduct you from the castle. And these were the motives, this the expectation, dearest Sibella, that withheld me from confessing in Valmont woods —*that I loved you with all my soul*.

The seven days I remained at the castle I forbore, although with difficulty, to ask you questions, that I might gradually develope your character, as surrounding circumstances should operate on your feelings. Sometimes, I saw you devoted to me; sometimes, I saw your imagination soaring as it were beyond the bounds prescribed to your person, in search of a remoter object. Why, dear Sibella, are you so pensive? Why do you gaze on that portrait of yourself with so much earnestness? And why do you caress that little fawn, who wears a collar inscribed with the initials – C. M. – till your eyes fill with tears?

Let me be the partaker of your unrestrained emotions; while I, who have a wider range of observation, will place my opinions before you without check or limit. Our next resting place is to be the seat of a nabob: Sir Thomas Barlowe's, amongst whose laboured pleasures I shall wish to return to gloomy Valmont, where I found a felicity of which I have no promise in the scenes I am now destined to partake. Adieu! adieu!

CAROLINE ASHBURN

LETTER IV
FROM SIBELLA VALMONT TO CAROLINE ASHBURN

Was I pensive, did I gaze, did I sigh, did I weep, when you Miss Ashburn were with me – what do I know when I have only for companion the faithful, the exquisite, but torturing representation of memory? Can I do more than gaze, and sigh, and weep? O yes, I can: for, Miss Ashburn, I can raise altars on a thousand spots in these woods, which were once hallowed by the footsteps of him I love!

Two years have elapsed since he bade me farewel: therefore did you see me pensive.

That picture of me was painted by himself: therefore do I gaze on it.

The fawn he took from a dying mother; by him she was nourished into familiarity. Nina has ceased to mourn the absence of her benefactor; she is satisfied with my caresses; but the heart of Sibella Valmont, nor now, nor ever, can find any substitute for her Clement Montgomery.

I was nearly six years old when they told me that I had lost my father. He had travelled a twelvemonth before to foreign countries, for the benefit of his health; and I knew not that his death more than his absence would deprive me of my happiness, till my uncle Valmont came and carried me away in his coach from my governess, my maid, and all the domestics who loved me and whom I loved, of my father's household.

Then, indeed, I mourned; and my uncle attempted to soothe me. He said, I must be happy, for I was now dependent upon him; and it was my duty to love him, obey him, and be satisfied. My swelling heart revolted against being commanded to be happy; and I found not one person at the Castle who could supply to me the want of my kind governess and kind maid, except a little dog that on my first entrance had fawned on me as if he wished to make me happier. Him I carried incessantly in my arms; and I told him, whenever we were alone, how I longed to get back to my father's house and to carry him along with me.

In a fortnight after I arrived at Valmont, the affectionate little animal died; and I remained inconsolable. I was sitting weeping on the hall steps when my uncle came to me. He wiped away my tears; bade me be cheerful; and said he had procured me a better play-fellow than Fidelle. My uncle led me with him into the library; and presented me to a boy three years older than myself, blooming, blushing, beautiful. 'Clement is my adopted son, Sibella,' said my uncle. He will henceforth live with you in the castle. Take him out child; and show him where you find the prettiest flowers and the ripest fruit.'

Ah! need I tell you how we advanced from shyness to familiarity, from familiarity to kindness, from kindness to love, all powerful, all potent! The castle then seemed no prison; the moat seemed no barrier. Sometimes my uncle carried Clement abroad to visit him, but then I was sure of his return. Even the hours of instruction I shared with him. He had a good, an amiable tutor, who delighted in teaching to me also every science he taught to Clement; and if Mr. Valmont frowned upon me or checked my industry, Clement was still at my side and I smiled through my tears.

Thus passed away the years from six till sixteen. On the day that I became sixteen, we had run races with our little fawn; and, having wearied ourselves with exertion, we had lain down to rest in each other's arms, at the foot of that oak where you, Miss Ashburn, first beheld me. My uncle broke our happy slumbers. He came to the oak; and sternly commanded Clement to rise and follow him.

I followed too. My uncle sat down in his library; and appeared to meditate; while we looked on each other with love and pity, and on him we looked with suspicion and affright.

When my uncle began to speak, Clement trembled; but all my emotions were chained up in astonishment: for I heard him say that Clement should that day quit the castle, that he should seek new companions, new countries, new climates.

'Never! never!' I cried. I folded my arms round my lover – 'Thou shalt not go, Clement,' I said. 'We have world enough. No: thou shalt not go, my Clement!'

Mr. Valmont furiously bade me desist; but he had awakened a dread in my mind more powerful than my dread of him. For a time, I expostulated with vehemence and courage; but I could not repress my tears – and, while I was compelled to listen to my uncle, his tone, his words impressed me with my former awe of him and rendered my remonstrance timid and useless.

To Clement he said, 'You are now to leave these boyish follies, and learn the duties of a man. You shall mix with society; but remember that you are not to be attracted by its specious appearances. Scrutinize into its follies and enormities, as I have done; and let my precepts and instructions be your guide and law. Remember, Clement, that I took you from poverty and obscurity. Remember too that, on your duty and gratitude depends your security. That child,' he pointed to me, 'mind me, sir, that child is in future to be considered only as your sister.'

'As for you, Sibella,' he said to me, 'your duties in life are easily performed. I have chosen a part for you: and nothing is required of you but obedience. You have heard me declare to Clement, and I now repeat it to you, that to Clement Montgomery you are to be no more than a sister.' This day he quits us. When he shall return, I have not determined.'

Yes, Caroline, my Clement went. Two years has he roamed in a world which I am forbidden to know. But, alike in viewing the palace or the cottage, the burning mountain or the fertile plain, must the idea of Sibella accompany him. Our minds, our principles, our affections are the same; and, while I trace his never to be forgotten image within my breast, I know how fondly he cherishes the remembrance of mine.

Caroline, adieu! I go to the oak. On that consecrated spot, mountains, seas, continents dissolve, and my spirit unites with his!

SIBELLA VALMONT

LETTER V
FROM CAROLINE ASHBURN TO SIBELLA VALMONT

Yes, dearest Sibella, charming Sibella, in that one short but rapid sentence, you have taught me to understand your progress, *from shyness to familiarity, from familiarity to kindness, from kindness to love, all powerful, all potent*. Oh! be that love happy in its continuance, as at its commencement! Be it the pure garb of your Clement's soul, upon which vice shall leave no spot nor wrinkle! Be it, as you say, That *your hearts, your affections, your principles are the same*; and I would trust this lover amidst allurements such as virtue held seldom rejected, had seldom turned from without contamination.

Your uncle, my Sibella, I perceive, intended you for your lover, and your lover for you. His project, then, was to place a second Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Well, Sibella, innocence remains with you. Your Eden will yet bloom; for, trust me, innocence and happiness cannot long be separated.

Why will that uncle of your's so strenuously uphold his mysterious reserve and silence? I long to ask him a million of questions; and he knows that I do, and he wishes that I should. It is not because he is altogether convinced of the wisdom and utility of his plans, that he does plan; it is, that he will oppose himself to general customs and general experience. It is singularity and not perfection that he is in search of; and, since experience formerly taught him, that even the renowned name of Valmont might mix undistinguished with a herd of less illustrious names, he now bravely resolves to enforce the wonder of his compeers, if he cannot claim their reverence.

Perhaps, with the flattering promises of success, he sometimes soothes the rancour of his solitude. And occasionally, indeed, his existence is remembered, and his whimsies are made the subject of ridicule, contempt, and laughter; but some novel circumstance, such as the gay Mrs. Ashburn's visit to his gloomy retirement, must call them into this remembrance, or the name of Mr. Valmont would rest as undisturbed as does, in every memory but his own, the deeds of his forefathers.

It is to my mother's excursion to Valmont castle, that I owe the felicity of calling you my friend, it is to her escape from thence, as she herself terms it, that I owe my knowledge of Mr. Valmont's history. Surrounded, on her arrival at the house of Sir Thomas Barlowe, by a crowd of visitors, as gay, profuse, and dissipated as herself, she hastens to communicate her joy at the agreeable change, and to inveigh against the morose Mr. Valmont and his insipid wife. A conversation ensued of some length for such a subject, during which I discovered that two of the party, the Earl of Ulson and Colonel Ridson were once the intimate companions of Mr. Valmont. The former of these gentlemen appeared eager to place his defects in the strongest point of view; while the latter, with less zeal, to be sure, but with a sweetness of temper infinitely endearing, was willing to smooth the rugged parts of Mr. Valmont's character, and to place a vice behind the glare of a virtue. By setting aside, to the best of my judgment, the Earl's exaggerations, and making also some allowance for the palliative temper of Colonel Ridson, I had succeeded in learning as much of Mr. Valmont's history as enables me to form some, and I believe no inaccurate estimate of his worth, abilities, and character.

Your grandfather, Sibella, a being quite as eccentric tho' less whimsical than your uncle, lived in the castle you now inhabit. Nor would he, of his own free will, have quitted that castle for heaven itself. Every stone of the building that had kept its station in times of turbulence and discord against the attack of an enemy was to him an idol. If he was thoughtful, it was in recalling the great deeds of his ancestors; if he was talkative, it was on the same theme; if he had wishes, they were that he had lived in those glorious days when fighting well was the most eminent of virtues, and a strong fortified castle and obedient vassals the most valuable of possessions.

As is the established practice in families of such renown and dignity, as that to which you, my friend, appertain, the first born son of your grandfather was the only hope, the only joy, the only object of the careful solitude of his anxious parents; while your father, coming into the world two years after

his brother, was adored, flattered and spoiled by no creature but his nurse. Your uncle, I understand, received a stately kind of education within the castle walls; and your father, happier because of less consequence, passed his early years with other young men of fashion at school and at college.

Mr. Valmont was not a whit behind his father in his veneration for high birth, but he could not boast so unqualified a love of fruits of armour; nor did he think that civil war was the only time when a man could gather honours worthy of a distinguished name. No sooner was your uncle emancipated from the fetters of his minority, than he resolved to repair to court, where he expected to find only his equals, and those equals alive to and exact in the observance of all that haughty decorum, which Mr. Valmont deemed indispensably necessary to the well being of social institutions. Poor man! he feels himself lost in the motley multitude, sees his high-born pretensions to notice and deference pushed aside by individuals obscure in their origin, but renowned for artful intrigues, for bold perseverance, and dazzling success! Shocked at the contaminating mixture, he had fled back with precipitancy to his castle, but love detained him, for he had made an offering of his heart to a woman of rank and fashion. Nothing could be more unfortunate than this passion. Nothing further from congeniality than the minds and manners of Lady Margaret B – and Mr. Valmont: he, just risen, as it were, from the tomb of his progenitors, loaded with the punctilio of the last age, recoiling from the salute of every man who could not boast an unblemished pedigree, and lastly, and most worthily, possessing refined ideas of female delicacy, of honourable love, and of unchanging fidelity; and she, on the contrary, a graceful coquette, without an atom of real tenderness in her heart, and valuing her rank merely as it gave her opportunities of extending her conquest. Lady Margaret B – was highly diverted with Mr. Valmont's formalities; and, in spite of the torture her dissipated coquettish manners inflicted on him, she had sufficient power to make him the most ardent of her lovers. In fine, she rejected him, laughed at him, despised him.

I could not hear this anecdote, nor can I repeat it, without a sensation of pain, so strongly do I enter into the irritable feelings of your uncle, when, hitherto accustomed only to receive homage and obedience, he is at once foiled in his ambition by low born courtiers, and betrayed in his love by a high born jilt.

Mr. Valmont consulted no other guide than his passions; and instantly drew an angry and false picture of mankind. With such people as I have spoken of he could not associate; for their vices he abhorred; but his mind had not fortitude enough, had not comprehension enough, to cast aside his own prejudices; and, instead of attempting to reform mankind, he retires to rail at them; and carries with him the pride, selfishness, and love of power, in which all the vices of society originate.

Wrapped in the impenetrable selfishness of high birth, Mr. Valmont denies the possibility of eminent virtue existing without rank. Who shall presume to arraign his principles, to sit in judgment upon his actions, to teach him his duty? I stand, cries Mr. Valmont, within the sacred verge of nobility! Look on that coat of arms! I derive from the Normans! Wisdom in rags – keep off!

True: his ancestors conquered, that he should be wise! – Oh, cede to him the palm! Bind his brows with the laurel!

After a few months retirement, Mr. Valmont ventured once more into the heterogeneous multitude, in search of a wife: for, I suspect he found himself as ill qualified for solitude as society. Beside, he had formed the virtuous project of instructing a new race, to put the old world out of countenance.

I cannot but pause, to reflect upon your uncle's toils in search of his help mate. He must have a wife, whose pedigree his future sons might place beside his own; and he must have one, of a temperament and character opposite to that of lady Margaret B – ; and his good stars, his ill stars, or whatever else you please, led him to the feet of Mrs. Valmont.

It is true, your aunt was neither as coquettish nor had she the sprightly wit nor the mischievous gaiety of lady Margaret, but she loved crowds, detested solitude, and was a votary of dissipation; to convince her how much he had studied her inclinations, and how much he meant to gratify them, no

sooner was Mr. Valmont in possession of his bride then he snatched her from the scenes where her existence was alone valuable to her, and buried her amidst obscurity and horror at Valmont castle.

What is the consequence? she had no mental accomplishments in reserve for their mutual benefit and delight; nor had he mind enough to steal fire from heaven and animate with life the marble. From the struggle of tempers, and the warfare of words, she droops into an hypocondriac; he degenerates into a cynic, proud of himself alone.

Among the disappointments produced by this marriage, the want of children was the most offensive to Mr. Valmont. Your father, who had pursued a course of life quite different from his brother, tasting all the excesses of dissipation; died; and, very improperly in my opinion, left you to the guardianship of your uncle. That Mr. Valmont should adopt a son from the lowly condition of a cottager's child, has occasioned much wonder and many surmises; however, as I do not find any thing material either to you or me in the conjectures, I have listened to on this occasion, I shall not be at the pains of relating them.

But how comes it to pass, my dearest Sibella, that when your uncle had the means of gratifying his darling wish in educating two children, and one of them a female, to whom according to his creed, nothing should be granted beyond what the instinct of appetite demands, how comes it, I say, that you possess the comprehensive powers of intellect? from what sources did you derive that eager desire of knowledge of which I find you possessed; and how came you to be learned on subjects, which, in the education of females, are strictly withheld, to make room for trifling gaudy and useless acomplishments? tell me by what miracle I find you such as you are, and let me cease to wonder at you, but never let me cease to love you.

Tell me too, how came you to be dependent on your uncle? Does your dependence only mean the protection due from him who stands in the place of a parent to you? I wish to be informed what explanation Mr. Valmont and yourself affix to the term of dependent, when it is applied to you; for colonel Ridson talks so familiarly of the fortune you must possess from your mother, and also the wealth of the Valmont family which he says is yours by heirship, that I must own I am puzzled. I care little about your being rich, but is seems unnatural and unjust to have you a dependent on your haughty uncle.

Ah, my dear Sibella, how often in a day do I feast my imagination by allowing it to bear me back to you; and yet perhaps, our separation gives a spur, a stimulus to our friendship. I am not convinced, indeed, but that temporary separations are even useful between lovers; and that Mr. Valmont may have acted rather wisely than otherwise, in parting you and your Clement for a season. Why he should bid you remember him only as a brother, is really too far plunged into obscurity for me to discover.

Do not, however, suppose for an instant that my affection for you would decay were I at liberty to enjoy your society as I wish; on the contrary, I am persuaded that every hour I should pass with you would add something to my improvement, and render us more valuable to each other. My expression arose from my being at that moment in idea a partner of your seclusion, and feeling that I should want in the same situation that energy and activity which is the support of your solitude. I am fond of society; and, indeed, I find myself most excited when I have most opportunities of observing the various characters and pursuits of those around me. Gladly would I possess the power of selecting my society. From that happy privilege I am debarred. But I seldom make one of a circle in which I do not find some novelty of character, and something either of excellence or absurdity from which I may draw improvement.

Yet, a two month's visit at the villa of Sir Thomas Barlowe is rather a hard trial of my patience; and, unless we are enlivened by new visitors, I fear the company here will afford me but a trifling harvest of observation. I shall soon be glad to turn from them to my own resources; and fly, even oftener than I now do, to the ever vivifying remembrance of my Sibella.

Sir Thomas Barlowe has risen from some very obscure station to the wealth and dignity of a nabob. He has risen too, I greatly fear, by the same depredating practices which the unfortunate

natives of India seem destined constantly to suffer from those who perfidiously call themselves the protectors of the country. Sir Thomas Barlowe's riches have become his punishment. Each morning, his fears awaken with his faculties, lest that day should bring tidings of the dreaded scrutiny; and, when evening arrives, and he struggles to yield himself to mirth and wine amidst the circle he has assiduously gathered round him, a word, a look, or the most remote hint or allusion gives his watchful terrors an alarm. A sudden turn of his head, perchance, discovers his shadow on the wall. Legions of threatening phantoms then crowd upon his apprehension; and the evening, yet more miserable than the day, concludes with an opiate, administered to lull the feeble body into lethargy, and hush the perturbed conscience into silence.

And my mother can look on this existing fact with indifference, while I shudder. Those enormous sums of wealth she lavishes away, that cluster of pearls she triumphantly places in her hair, those diamonds heaped into different ornaments, how were they obtained? Thousands perhaps – Oh, Sibella! I have laid aside my ornaments! A dress plain as your's supersedes them.

Lady Barlowe is a composition of a very curious kind. She is about forty years younger than her husband, is tolerably pretty, and has a showy talent of repartee that she mistakes for a sublime genius; and her inclinations are perpetually at warfare, without being able to decide whether she shall be most renowned as a wit or a beauty. She is extravagantly fond of admiration, which she formerly enjoyed unlimitedly, being the head toast of a small county town, till she became the wife of a nabob. Prosperity has not increased her happiness; for in the great and gay world she has found rivals of such magnitude that malice and envy have strung up within that bosom which till now owned no inmate but vanity.

These are our host and hostess. The first in precedency among the visitors ranks the Earl of Ulson: an antiquated gallant, who, in public, affects not to feel the approaches of age; and, in private, broods over the consciousness of its effects till he sickens with ill nature. The countess of Ulson hates her husband; nor has she over much charity and good-will towards other men. She talks largely, indeed, of her piety, and the strict performance of her manifold duties.

This amiable pair are attended by their son and two daughters. Lord Bowden is so perfectly satisfied within himself, that, if you will take his word for it, there is not a more amiable and accomplished young man in England. His eldest sister, lady Mary Bowden claims no praise beyond what is justly due to the complacency of her temper; she is at once too giddy and too indolent to aim at meriting a more enlarged praise; she loves dress, company, cards, and scandal; and indulges herself in the use of the latter as a mere matter of course, without entertaining the smallest particle of ill-will towards the very persons she helps to vilify. I have endeavoured to convince lady Mary of the folly of this practice, and she acknowledges, that what I say appears very much to the purpose, but then how can she cease to do what every body does.

All the beauty that exact regularity of feature, and transparency of complexion can bestow, is in the possession of the Earl of Ulson's youngest daughter, lady Laura Bowden. Beyond this description, I hardly know what to say of her. I can perceive she entertains a very hearty contempt for her sister; and perhaps, she may hold me in as little estimation; but a woman so perfectly well bred as lady Laura does not display such sentiments if she entertains them, unless some species of rivalship should unfortunately call her passions into action. I do not think her either witty or wise, yet I have been told she bears the reputation of the former, and is poet enough occasionally to pen a rebus or an acrostic. It may be so. I have not been favoured with her confidence. A delicate languor pervades her manners, and this is generally honoured with the name of sensibility. I am apt to call it affectation; for the sensibility that I understand and admire, is extreme only in proportion to the greatness of the occasion; it does not waste itself in vapours, nor is it ever on the watch for wasps and spiders. Colonel Ridson assures me that Lady Laura Bowden is admired by the whole world, and that he must be the happiest of men on whom her ladyship bestows a preference.

Colonel Ridson loves his white teeth, and his epaulet. He likes every body, praises every body, is attentive to every body; lives without attachment; and will probably die in the same torpid state, without ever knowing felicity, or ordinary misfortune.

The colonel hitherto has been the only unmarried man amongst us, except Lord Bowden, who really is so assiduous in remembering his own recommendations that no one else finds it necessary to remember him or them at all.

But we are now to be enlivened. It seems we damsels are to be excited to call forth our charms, for the conquest of a youth of no common value, as his fame goes here. Sir Thomas Barlowe's nephew, Mr. Murden, arrived at the villa this very day.

I know not why I should be particularly selected from the party, by Sir Thomas Barlowe, to listen to his encomiums on this nephew. From the most insignificant occurrences, the Baronet has constantly occasion to say – 'Ha! Ha! Miss Ashburn, if my nephew Arthur was but come!' If I praised a dish of fruit at table, the nabob's nephew Arthur had certainly done the same thing. Let me speak of walking or riding, let me complain of hail, rain or sunshine, Arthur was still my promised chaperon, the future knight-errant of all my grievances.

'Tell me something,' said I one day to Colonel Ridson, 'of this Mr. Murden, this hope of the family.'

'He is very handsome,' replied the Colonel.

'But is he good?'

'Assuredly.'

'And amiable?'

'Infinitely!'

'And wise?'

'To a miracle, madam,' replied the Colonel.

Good! amiable! wise! – Who could desire more?

Lady Mary Bowden stood beside me one afternoon, while the baronet was reminding me of his dear Arthur. 'Sir Thomas I believe intends,' said I to her, 'that I shall be in love by anticipation. You know Mr. Murden. What is he?'

'Oh!' cried Lady Mary, lifting up her right hand, to enforce the spirit of her emphasis, 'he is the most abominable rake in the universe!'

I absolutely started. 'It is possible, Lady Mary, you should mean what you say?' I asked after a moment's pause. 'Yes! certainly!' replied her ladyship, quite gaily; 'every body knows of hundreds with whom he has been a very happy man.'

'I do not want,' said I, 'to hear what every body says. I want, Lady Mary, to know your own sincere opinion of Mr. Murden. If you have already told me a fact, my situation to be sure will oblige me to be sometimes in his company; but, in that case, there exists not a reptile, however noxious or despicable, from whom I should shrink with more abhorrence than from this boasted nephew of the nabob.'

'Good God!' cried Lady Mary: 'Why! what did I say? I protest I have forgotten, already. I am sure I know no harm in the world of Mr. Murden.'

'Did not you tell me he was an abominable rake?'

'They say so,' replied Lady Mary. 'He certainly is very engaging. He admires fine women. But I don't know whether he has ever made serious addresses to any one. Miss Ashburn, I'll tell you a secret.'

'You had better not. I don't keep secrets.'

'Oh, all the world knows it, already. Lady Laura is quite fond of Murden. You would have laughed to have seen her last winter, as I did, plunged over head and ears in sentiment and sensibility. Well, I do hate affectation.'

'And you do love good nature.'

'So I do,' said she smiling; 'and I hope with all my heart that my poor sister may now secure her conquest, unless indeed, Miss Ashburn, it should interfere with you.'

Neither the baronet's hints, the colonel's all good, all wise, nor the motley dubious character given by Lady Mary Bowden of Mr. Murden, would have tempted me to devote thus much of my paper to him. I have other inducements. I have heard that the domestics of Barlowe Hall anxiously expected the day of his coming. A gardener, who has been discharged for no worse fault, I believe, than his being too old, assures himself, that the prosperity of him and his family will be restored when Mr. Murden arrives. I have heard also, that the neighbouring cottagers bless him. Such a man must have worth. Agnes, who is zealous to tell me all the good she can of any one, has related several anecdotes of Mr. Murden, from which I learn, that he possesses sympathy and benevolence. I cannot tell how such qualities can exist in the mind of a man who is, either in principle or practice, a libertine. Yet, Agnes also had been told that Mr. Murden was a libertine. I bade her enquire more; and she could hear of no particular instances wherein the peace of individuals or families had been injured by him. Still those with whom Agnes conversed, bestowed on him this hateful title. I fear the reproach may belong to him. Young men are frequently carried into these excesses, from the pernicious effect of example, sometimes from vanity, and from a variety of other causes, all which tend to one uniform effect, to destroy the understanding, deprave the heart, corrupt the disposition, and render loathsome and detestable a being that might have lived an honour and a blessing to his species. If Mr. Murden is indeed devoted to this error, farewel to his benevolent virtues, to his sense of justice; and farewel to the pleasure and instruction I might have gained in the society of a virtuous man.

I said Mr. Murden was already arrived; but I have not seen him. He paid his duty to his uncle, in the Baronet's own apartment; and then retired to dress before he would present himself in the breakfast parlour. Lady Laura appeared impatient; she was adorned in a new morning dress, perfectly graceful and becoming. The hour came in which I was to write to my Sibella; and I would not sacrifice that employment for twenty such introductions.

Farewel, my friend! Close to your altar of love, raise one of friendship, and I also will meet you at the oak.

CAROLINE ASHBURN

LETTER VI
FROM SIBELLA VALMONT TO CAROLINE ASHBURN

A confused recollection sprang up in my mind when you questioned me concerning my dependence. On the day of his last departure, my father caressed me fondly; he held me a long time in his arms; and he shed tears over me. He spoke, likewise, at intervals; not, perhaps, with any expectation of being understood by me, but to relieve the weighty pressure of his thoughts. I well remember that he named my uncle. He had many papers on a table before him; and I think there was a connection in his discourse between them and me. I believe he spoke of some disposition of his fortune; but the time is now remote, and the idea is indistinct. I cannot cloathe it in expression.

I do not possess a fortune; for my uncle calls me dependent, talks of obligations I owe to him for the gratification of my wants. He talks of obligations, who denies me instruction, equality, and my Clement. He provides me food and raiment. Are there not thousands in the world, where you and Clement live, who supply such wants by labour? And I too could labour. Let Mr. Valmont retire to the shelter of his canopy, and the luxury of down! I can make the tree my shade, and the moss my pillow.

Mr. Valmont calls himself my father; and *calling* himself such, he there rests satisfied. Cold in his temperament, stern from his education, he imagines kindness would be indulgence, and indulgence folly. Ever on the watch for faults, the accent of reproof mingles with his best commendations.

He demands my obedience, too! What obedience? the grateful tribute to duty, authorised by reason, and sanctioned by the affections? No. Mr. Valmont, here at least, ceases to be inconsistent. He never enlightened my understanding, nor conciliated my affections; and he demands only the obedience of a fettered slave. I am held in the bondage of slavery. And still may Mr. Valmont's power constrain the forces of this body. But where, Miss Ashburn, is the tyrant that could ever chain thought, or put fetters on the fancy?

I charge you, cease to repeat my uncle's useless prohibition, that I should remember Clement otherwise than as a brother. Let him give his barrier to the waves, arrest the strong air in its current, but dream not of placing limits to the love of Clement and Sibella!

Do I weary you with this endless topic? You read the world: I, my own heart. Imprisoned, during so many years, within the narrow boundary of this castle and its parks, the same objects eternally before me, I look with disgust from their perpetual round of succession. Nature herself, spring, summer, autumn, degenerate into sameness.

Where must I turn me then, but to the resources of my own heart? Love has enriched it; and friendship will not reject its offerings.

Yes: they are many, my Caroline; various and increasing. Shall my uncle tell me that my actions are confined to the mechanical operations of the body, that I am an imbecile creature, but a reptile of more graceful form, the half finished work of nature, and destitute of the noblest ornament of humanity? Blind to conviction, grown old in error, he would degrade me to the subordinate station he describes. He daringly asserts that I am born to the exercise of no will; to the exercise of no duties but submission; that wisdom owns me not, knows me not, could not find in me a resting place.

'Tis false, Caroline! I feel within the vivifying principle of intellectual life. My expanding faculties are nurtured by the passing hours! and want but the beams of instruction, to ripen into power and energy that would steep my present inactive life in forgetfulness.

Bonneville, when shall I cease to love thy memory, to recal thy lessons? It was thou, Bonneville, who first bade me cherish this stimulating principle; who called the powers of my mind forth from the chaos, wherewith Mr. Valmont had enveloped them. Thou, Bonneville, taught me that I make an unimpaired *one* of the vast brotherhood of human kind; that I am a being whose mistakes demand the conviction of reason, but whose mind ought not to bow down under power and prejudice.

He of whom I speak, Miss Ashburn, was chosen to be Clement's tutor. Can you conceive the sensations which swell within my breast while I recal the memory of this friend of my infancy? My friend, ere I lost Clement, ere I knew you, Caroline. Methinks I hear his voice; I see his gestures. Again, he enters the wood path. Again, I behold that countenance beautiful in age, radiant in wisdom. – He speaks. My soul hangs on his utterance. All my lesser affections fade away.

Ah, no! no! no! Bonneville is gone for ever! Clement is torn from me! You are interdicted! and I am alone in the wood path!

I hailed him by the name of father. He called me his child. He was enervated with disease. The chill damps of evening pierced him. The wintry blast shook his feeble frame. Still, would he endure the damps of evening, and tremble under the cold blast, rather than Sibella should be sunk in ignorance and sloth; for her cruel uncle had forbidden her an entrance into that apartment where Bonneville gave Clement his daily instruction.

Five days passed away, and Clement had not met his tutor in the library. Five long evenings, Clement had taken his usual rides with Mr. Valmont, yet no Bonneville had visited the oak. My mind anticipated the hour of his approach, and mourned its disappointment. My questions accumulated; I stored up demand upon demand; I recalled the subject of all our conversations; I carefully selected for another investigation, those parts which I had not fully comprehended; I arranged my doubts; and, perhaps, had never so prepared my mind for improvement, as when I heard that Bonneville was in bed, ill, dying. I flew to his apartment. Clement followed me. We saw him die. 'My father! my father!' I cried. 'You will not leave us! We are your children! Better were it that we should die with you than be left without you. My father! my father!'

Sobs and tears could not delay the inexorable moment; and my life seemed to fade from me, when I found that his lips were closed for *ever*.

Would you believe that my uncle – Yes, you would believe, for you know his haughty sternness, – but no matter, 'tis past, and ought to be forgotten.

But a few days, and not an eye save mine, wept for the absence of Bonneville. Clement was satisfied with a new tutor. The new tutor was wise, good, and kind; for Clement said so; but he strictly obeyed Mr. Valmont, and Sibella was abandoned of guide, of father.

Death, an object new, hideous, and awfully mysterious was now ever before me. Multitudes of dark perplexing ideas succeeded each other in my mind, with a rapidity which doubt and dissatisfaction created. 'Why is it?' said I to myself, 'and what cause can produce an effect so overwhelming? Throughout life, the mind invariably rules the functions of the body. It transports itself from, and returns to its abode at pleasure; it can look back on the past, or fly forward to the future; it passes all boundary of place; creates or annihilates; and soars or dives into other worlds. Yet, in one moment, its wearied tool, the body, had extinguished these omnipotent powers, and to me quenched its vast energies for ever.' I wrung my hands in bitterness, and in anguish of heart; and I called loudly on the name of my lost instructor, for I had now no instructor.

Caroline, do not expect me to speak again of Bonneville. The tumult, the perplexity returns; and no solution is at hand to soothe or to cheer me.

Seventeen days, Mr. Valmont, his steward, and their labourers have occupied my wood.

My uncle himself gave me a command not to appear there during the day. – I said, 'At night, Sir, I am I hope at liberty.'

'You are, child,' my uncle replied; and I failed not to avail myself of the privilege. On the rising ground of the broad wood path, and nearly opposite to my oak, I found the earth dug away, and preparations made, of which I could not give an explanation; but from the progress of a few days labour, a small beautiful edifice of white marble gradually rose under the shade of a clump of yew trees, whose branches were reflected on the polished surface as in a mirror.

Its structure appeared to me beautiful. I was charmed with it as a novel object. I rejoiced that it was so near my oak. But I stood utterly at a loss, when I attempted to form an opinion of its design or utility.

Perhaps when you were at the castle, you became acquainted with the defects and singularities of the two attendants whom my uncle assigned me. Andrew, almost inflexible in silence, attempts (when I put him to the trial) to explain himself by signs. While his daughter possesses not, that I could ever discover, in the smallest degree the faculty of hearing. Andrew often looks on me with affection; but Margaret, who has a most repulsive countenance and demeanour, appears, even while I endeavour to conciliate her by kind looks, to be scarcely conscious that I am in existence. With such companions intercourse is rigorously excluded. In cases of peculiar uncertainty, I sometimes venture to apply to Andrew, as I did on the morning after I had seen the beautiful edifice in the wood path completed. Andrew said, 'Tis a tomb.'

Shortly after, I called at Mrs. Valmont's door to inquire of her health, for she is now recovering slowly from a severe indisposition. Very unusually, she desired I might be admitted. I stood while I spoke to her, for the wood was at liberty, and I was impatient to be gone. The surprise of Andrew's concise information was new in my mind, and I began to describe the structure in the wood path. I perceived Mrs. Valmont's attendant directing strange looks and gestures to me, and I paused to ask her meaning. She positively denied the circumstance, and I proceeded. When I mentioned the name of *tomb*, Mrs. Valmont started forward on the couch where she sat. 'Raised a tomb!' cried she. 'For whom?' And then, again falling back in seeming agony, she added without waiting for my reply, 'Yes, I know it well, he has opened a tomb for me.'

'For you, madam?' I said, 'you are not yet dead.'

'Barbarian!' exclaimed Mrs. Valmont, looking fiercely on me, 'not yet dead! – Insolent! – Be gone, I shall be dead but too soon. Be gone, I say, the very sight of any of your hated infidel race destroys me.'

I wished to understand how Mrs. Valmont's anger and agitations were thus excited, for she began to utter strange assertions, that my uncle intended to murder her, and that he had made me his instrument. She groaned and wept. One of her attendants urged me to withdraw; and I complied. From thence, I visited the tomb. Again I admired its structure and its situation; but I could not devise why a receptacle for the dead should be reared amidst the living.

At this time Mr. Valmont himself, followed by his steward and by Andrew, came to inspect the tomb. Methought he looked pleased, when he saw me resting upon it. He viewed it round and round, walked to the foot of the rock, and contemplated it at that distance. Mr. Ross did the same, but Andrew stood still some yards on the other side. My uncle spoke thus at intervals.

'No doubt strange reports will circulate, throughout the neighbourhood, of this monument.'

'The vulgar fools, who lend so ready a belief to the ridiculous tales of that Ruin, will now have another hinge on which to turn their credulity.'

'Sibella, take again the attitude I saw you in when I entered the wood. There, child; keep that posture a short time, your figure improves the scene.'

'Does the monument excite much wonder, Ross?'

'It does indeed, Sir,' the steward replied. 'They wonder at the expence, they wonder more at the object; and, still more than that, they wonder at the unconsecrated ground.'

'And my impiety is, I imagine, the topic of the country.' The steward remained silent. 'Andrew remember my orders, and repeat them to your fellows: I will have no idle tales fabricated in the servant's hall.'

'What are the opinions of other men, concerning holy and unholy, to me? It belongs to men of rank to spurn the prejudices of the multitude.'

Shortly after, my uncle addressed himself to me.

'A strange message, child, has been sent me from Mrs. Valmont, which you it seems have caused. What have you been saying to her?'

I repeated the conversation. My uncle smiled in scorn.

'Contemptible folly!' said he, 'The vicinity of a tomb becomes a mortal disease. It is hard to judge whether the understanding or the frame of such animals is of the weaker texture. Child, you have killed your aunt, by reminding her that she may one day happen to be buried.'

I was startled with the phrase of, *I had killed my aunt*; and I began eagerly to speak. My uncle interrupted me with saying:

'There is no real harm done, child. These nervous affections are tremendous in representation, but trifling in reality. You will, however, do well to remember, that I do not approve of your frequenting Mrs. Valmont's apartments.'

My uncle then left me, not quite satisfied with myself nor with his representation of Mrs. Valmont's case. Yet, on a careful review of the past, I did not feel that my words, my manner, or my information could justly tend to produce uneasiness either to her or me. Yet Mrs. Valmont persists in holding me culpable; and has twice rejected the messages I have sent by Andrew.

Still, Caroline, I do not understand why my uncle should have expended money to rear a marble tomb, when any spot of waste ground might serve for the receptacle of a lifeless body; nor can I understand how Mrs. Valmont is injured by the knowledge of the circumstance. My uncle's conversation with Mr. Ross is for the most part beyond my comprehension. I observe too, that every part of the family, more carefully even than before, now shun the wood. Last night, when Nina and I had held our evening converse at the oak, till the moon shone at her height, Andrew came in search of me; he stood at an unusual distance; and, having beckoned me to return, he with a soft quick step, hastened before me to the castle.

Thus, dearest Caroline, I pass from the weight of a tedious uniformity, to view and wonder at the mysterious actions of mysterious people. Oh, speak to me then, my friend. You I can understand. You I love, admire, revere. Speak to me often, Caroline. Bring the varieties of your life before me. Awaken my feelings with your's, and let my judgment strengthen in your experience.

SIBELLA VALMONT

LETTER VII
FROM CAROLINE ASHBURN TO SIBELLA VALMONT

My dearest Sibella,

To all that I yet know of you, I give unmixed praise. Your own rectitude, your own discernment, and your reliance on my sincerity, satisfies you of this truth; and I am assured that I have your sanction when I speak less of yourself than of frailer mortals.

On casting my eye over the foregoing lines, I smile to perceive that I felt as if it were necessary to apologize for the strong propensity I have to begin this letter as I concluded my last, namely, with Mr. Murden; whom, in the moments of my best opinion, I cannot wholly admire, nor, at the worst of times, can I altogether condemn.

As he is, then, or as I think he is, take him. Colonel Ridson, you know, said Mr. Murden was handsome. So say I. At times, divinely handsome; but only at times. His figure, it is true, never loses its symmetry and grace; but his features, strongly influenced by their governing power the mind, vary from beauty to deformity; that is, deformity of expression. What would Lady Mary, Lady Laura, or the two Miss Winderhams, who are lately added to our party, say to hear me connect the ideas of Murden and deformity? Yet in their hearing, incurring the terrible certainty of being arraigned in their judgments for want of taste, of being charged with prudery, affectation, and I know not what besides, I shall dare repeat, that I have looked on Murden, and looked from him again, because he appeared deformed and disgusting. The libertine is ever deformed; the flatterer is ever disgusting.

His daily practice in this house justifies me in bestowing on him the latter epithet. I own, and I rejoice to own, that of the justice of the former I have my doubts. Vain he is. That he is gratified by, encourages, even stimulates the attention of fools and coquettes, I cannot deny; and when I view him indulging a weakness so contemptible, so dangerous, I am almost ready to believe he may be any thing that is vicious; and that, having taken vanity and flattery for his guides, he may attain to the horrid perfection of a successful debauchee.

Yet, what man, plunged in the whirlpool of debauchery, ever retained delicacy of sentiment and pungency of feeling? I think Murden possesses both. What man of debased inclinations would preserve that perpetual delicacy, that happy medium between neglect and encouragement, by which Murden regulates his conduct to Lady Laura Bowden? Lady Laura, celebrated as a wit and beauty, betrays to every observer her passion for Mr. Murden. I dreaded, on such an occasion, to see a vain young man, insolent in pity, or barbarous in neglect; but Lady Laura has not a particle more or less of his admiration, his flattery, and his services than any other lady of the circle.

Ah, I feel already that my description languishes. The Murden before me is a being of more vigour and more interest than the Murden on my paper. I have failed in discriminating the contradictory parts of his character; and I give up description; leaving those circumstances I may, on further acquaintance, select from the round of his actions to speak for him.

These insatiable devourers of amusement tear me from my pen. The morning, which in my mother's house in town I possessed uncontrouled, is no longer my own. The days are wasted in the execution of projects that promise much and perform nothing; and I made a whimsical attempt the other day, to convince my good friends here that we ought at least to be rational one half of one's time, if we would find any pleasure in being foolish the other half. But while I am complaining to you, Sibella, the party are perhaps complaining of me. Adieu for a short time. I go to taste *simplicity*. Not the simplicity of a golden age; but the simplicity of gold and tinsel. On the banks of a charming piece of water we fish, under a silken awning. Horns, clarionets, and bassoons are stationed in a neighbouring grove, with their sweet concords occasionally to soothe our fatigues. Ices, the choicest fruits, and other delicate preparations for the refreshment of the palate are at hand; and, notwithstanding all this costly care, it is very possible we shall pass a listless morning, return without

any increase of appetite, or animal spirits, and be mighty ready to bestow loud commendations on the pleasures of a morning, from which we derive no other secret satisfaction than the certainty of its being at an end.

A summons! The carriages are at the door. You understand, I hope, that this is a *rural* expedition therefore a coach and a chariot attends, Mr. Murden drives one phaeton, Colonel Ridson another, and Mrs. Ashburn, who has arisen from the voluptuous luxury of the palanquin, and eight slaves, to the more active triumph of a high seat, reins, and long whip, will drive Lady Laura Bowden in her curricle.

It would be vain for me to attempt to sleep, for I endure at present a very considerable portion, though from a different cause, of those restless feelings which so often, my Sibella, urge you from your bed.

I believe I shall not go to bed this night, yet I have not to tell you, that I am roused to this wakefulness by events strikingly removed from the ordinary course of our lives. On the contrary, the accidents of the day, though new in their form, are by no means of an uncommon character. It is, alas, no novelty for some people to be inconsistent, and for others to imagine that rank and riches, as it places them beyond the reach of the common misfortunes of life, gives them full privilege to censure the weak and contemn the unfortunate. I hope benevolence is not a novelty. I would not subtract from the due praise of any individual; but I feel it as it were a tacit reproach upon human nature, or rather upon human manners, when we loudly vaunt the benevolent actions of any single man. I love the man, be he whom he may, who will perform the offices of a brother to the weakest, the most despised of his fellow creatures; but I lament that the example should be so unusual; and, when seen, rather vaunted than valued; and speedily forgotten.

I have no reason to accuse myself of a want of penetration. Our morning was any thing but pleasant. The air from the water chilled Sir Thomas. Lady Barlowe could find no scope amidst the very small talk for one single repartee. The Earl of Ulson had the tooth-ache. The Countess detests the music of wind instruments; and my mother found out that she hated fishing. The young ladies lost their spirits and temper, by losing Mr. Murden, whose absence occurred in such a way as put me out of temper, and out of spirits also.

As we were on the road to the destined spot of diversion, a pretty country girl on a horse loaded with paniers drew up to the hedge-side, while the cavalcade passed her. I was in Mr. Murden's phaeton; and we were the last carriage but one. The girl, in making her awkward obeisance to the company, no sooner lifted her eyes to Mr. Murden, than she blushed deeper than scarlet. It was a blush of such deep shame, of such anguish, that I felt a sudden pain like a shock of electricity. The time of passing was so instantaneous, that I could not see what effect the blush had at the moment on Murden's countenance; but when I did look on him, I found him lost in thought, from which he presently started, to gaze back upon the girl, while she continued in sight. It was palpably obvious, that in this incident Murden had a concern more powerful than any interest he took in the party, for he remained dispirited and absent; and, after refusing to angle, and walking a few turns to and fro on the banks of the water, he said he should join us again before we returned to dinner, mounted his servant's horse, and disappeared. Thus were we left without one satisfied person of the party, except the ever-satisfied Colonel Ridson, and the self-satisfied Lord Bowden. We saw no more of Mr. Murden, till late in the afternoon.

I must now, my dear Sibella, call your attention to the history of an unfortunate woman, who, in occupying the greatest part of this afternoon, gave scope to the display of that hard-heartedness, and that benevolence to which I alluded in a former passage of this letter.

When Sir Thomas Barlowe left the East Indies, he retained in his service a young Creole as secretary. At that time, the youth, who was sanguine enough, and young enough to believe that his situation would increase in gain, and be permanent in favour, wrote to his mother, whom he contributed to support, saying it was his wish she should come to England. He expected she would wait for a remittance from him to pay her passage; but the mother, impatient to join her only child,

sold her little property, borrowed on her son's credit the remainder of the money for her passage, and set sail from Bengal much about the time that her son, with whom the climate had disagreed, and whom Sir Thomas had discharged, set sail from England.

Arrived in London, she hastens to Sir Thomas Barlowe's house, to meet this beloved son. The family are in the country; the porter surlily assures her that her son is gone. She will not believe him; demands the name of Sir Thomas Barlowe's country seat; returns to her lodging with trembling limbs and an aching heart; writes a letter to Barlowe Hall, which probably was never sent; and falls ill of an ague and fever. Eight weeks the unhappy woman languished in the extreme of misery and disease; receiving no tidings from her son, having no friend, no acquaintance, either to pity or relieve her. Her money all spent, her clothes almost all sold, she availed herself of a small recruit of strength, and begged her way, half naked, to Sir Thomas Barlowe's seat, kept alive, no doubt, by the feeble hope that she should yet find her son.

At Barlowe Hall, the tidings of her son's departure was confirmed. Despair gave her strength. In spite of the servants' opposition, she forced her way into the dining parlour, ere the dessert was yet removed. She designed to have thrown herself at the feet of Sir Thomas; but on whom did her eye first fix? on no other than Mrs. Ashburn, whom, in her own land, in her happiest days, she had served in the capacity of housekeeper. Had the apartment held the first potentates of the earth, I firmly believe they would have been as so many straws in the poor woman's way when she rushed forward to Mrs. Ashburn. She clasped her knees, kissed her hands, her gown, the very chair on which she sat, and was so wild and extravagant in her joy, that I do not wonder at the result. I only wonder that her intellects survived.

It was in vain the company expressed their disgust at so miserable an object; in vain my mother and Sir Thomas commanded her to rise and withdraw. She would, in her imperfect language, curse the climate of Britain. She would intreat them to send her back to her own country. She would relate the history of her griefs, till combined recollections, or perhaps the frigid countenances of those around her, wrought a passionate flood of tears; and she then quietly suffered the footman to conduct her from the room.

The rigid Countess of Ulson instantly began a severe investigation of the folly of the young Indian, who sent so far for his mother, while his own prosperity was yet wavering and uncertain. Lady Barlowe and the young ladies appeared disconcerted. The Earl of Ulson had dined in his own chamber. Colonel Ridson often shifted his seat. Mrs. Ashburn and Sir Thomas Barlowe gave their assent to the invective of Lady Ulson, adding at the same time all the shades of imprudence in the mother's enterprise. They agreed, however, in the necessity of affording her some relief. Two guineas from Sir Thomas, and two from Mrs. Ashburn was the *vast* sum contributed; and, with this four guineas, the servant was ordered to deliver the following commands: That she should immediately go back to London, where she might easily find employment for her support, till her son should know she was in England, and remit money for her return to India.

Colonel Ridson stole to the door after the servant, and gave into his hand a benefaction for the widow.

I had only waited the conclusion of the nabob's and my mother's determination; and I now left them.

The Indian did not, as before, attempt to rush into the parlour; but in the hall, she wrung her hands, gnashed her teeth, tore her hair, exclaiming, she must go back, she could not work, she could not live in a climate that would kill a dog. My remonstrances she could not hear. I might as well have spoken to the dead.

It was then that Mr. Murden returned home. Astonished at the frantic agonies of the poor distressed woman, he enquired the cause from the servants, whom pity had drawn around her. He threw his whip out of his hand, and coming up to the Indian – yes, Sibella, this *seducer* perhaps, this very elegant, fashionable, handsome, and admired Murden immediately lifted in his arms the poor

miserable despised object, from whose touch others had revolted, carried her into an apartment, and seated her by himself on a sopha, still holding his arm round her to prevent her relapsing into those violent excesses.

'You shall go back,' cried Murden. 'I swear by the God that made me, you shall go back to-morrow, to-day, this very hour, if you will but be calm.'

She looked on him steadily – it was such a look, Sibella!

'See,' said Murden, 'Miss Ashburn says, you shall go back. You know Miss Ashburn? Ay, and you love her too. I know you do.'

In a fainting voice, she said, – 'Then I shall die with my poor Joseph at last.'

Her head fell upon Murden's breast; and he suffered it to remain there, till he found she had become insensible; he then requested the housekeeper to see a bed prepared for her; and, by his kind speeches and charming tones, he rendered every servant as eager to do the poor woman service as he himself had been.

All this time, I forgot the country girl.

While I attended the Indian to her bed, Mr. Murden visited the drawing room and when I also went thither, I found Murden's face in a glow. He was debating with his uncle on the danger that might befal his sick patient, by removing her from Barlowe Hall to the next village, and the danger Sir Thomas might incur by allowing her to remain where she was. The nabob recollected she had spoken of her fever in London; and, already, he saw himself in the utmost danger, and half his family dead or dying of the mortal disease. Any sum of money, any thing in his house that could tend to her accommodation she might have, so that she was but removed. He absolutely shook with apprehension; and Murden was at length compelled to yield the point. A post chaise was accordingly got ready; two maids went in it with her, to support her, for successive faintings had reduced her to the weakness of an infant. Murden, although it was a rainy evening, walked by the side of the chaise to the village, to see that she was there taken proper care of.

In the drawing room, the interval between this arrangement and the time of Murden's return from the village was passed in a most irksome state. The weather would not allow of walking, or riding. No casual visitors arrived. Every common topic of conversation languished; and each individual dreaded lest some other of the party should begin to speak of the Indian, whom they were one and all laboriously urgent to forget. The entrance of tea and coffee was an immense relief. Their cups were received with unusual complacency, and their drooping spirits revived.

The card-tables were just arranged, when Murden entered. Good God, what a charm was diffused over his countenance! He was pale with fatigue, and want of food; his linen soiled; and his hair disordered with the wind and rain; but there was such a sweetness in his eyes, that no heart could resist it. Every one pronounced his name at once.

'Dear Murden!' breathed Lady Laura in the melting voice of love: then, covered with confusion, she added, 'Dear *Mr.* Murden, you will kill yourself!' At the same time, she made an involuntary motion for him to seat himself between her and her sister. He did so, his heart was open to the reception of all tenderness. He could not reject Lady Laura's tone. He took her hand. I saw him press it. He said something low and soft, and her cheeks were instantly suffused with a burning colour.

Ah that country girl! thought I. I could not help sighing for her. I sighed too for Murden. 'Would,' said I to myself, 'that he could suffer me to possess his confidence, would suffer me to advise, exhort, and intreat him to be worthy of himself!'

Perhaps, while these and other such reflections occupied my mind, my eyes were fixed upon Murden, for suddenly I perceived that his cheek took a stronger glow than even Lady Laura's; and he sprang up from his seat.

'James, bring me some biscuits and a jelly,' said he carelessly; 'Egad! I believe I have not dined to-day.'

This was enough to rouse Sir Thomas.

'There now!' cried the nabob.

'Was ever any thing like it? You have had no dinner! And here you are all this time in wet clothes! Lord, have mercy upon me! Call your valet!' and he began to ring the bell furiously. 'I am sure, Arthur, you will be ill. You will have a fever. You will certainly kill yourself, as Lady Laura says.'

I had too much compassion to look at Lady Laura; and so had Murden, for he crossed the other side of the room, and immediately withdrew.

As Murden shut one door, a servant opened another, and gave into my hands your last dear letter. I retired to my own chamber to read it.

You are a glorious girl, Sibella, you elevate, you excite me! You awaken my mind to more and more love of those fervid qualities that shine so eminent in you. Had your Bonneville lived – Well, fear not my love. The day of your liberty will come. There are perhaps other Bonnevilles in the world, who will like him delight to give you that instruction for which your mind pants. Already, you possess energy, fortitude, and feeling; and those qualities, now kept alive and fostered by your love, may one day be called into action by objects of higher magnitude, of far higher value, (forgive me) than love, though it were the love of a Sibella.

I stood at my window to read your letter. The rain and wind had ceased; there was not even breeze enough to shake away the drops that yet rested upon the leaves. The dim, grey, melancholy remains of day, just afforded sufficient light to read by; and, when I had finished your letter, I threw up the sash and leaned out, thinking of you, my Sibella, in my imagination seeing you, seeing your fawn, your wood, your oak, your black angry looking rock, your solemn ruin, your clumps of yew trees, your white marble tomb. And these objects engrossed my whole attention, while those which surrounded me became hid in darkness.

Footsteps passed underneath my window through a path leading to the stables.

One voice said, 'Many and many a hard day's work have my poor dame and I done since, and have gone to bed to cry and moan all night for Peggy's naughtiness. We were ashamed to show our faces in our own parish. But your honour assures me you won't forget her.'

Another voice answered, 'All that I have promised I will perform, depend on it.'

The latter voice was Murden's. Now I felt the chill air of evening, and I shut down my window.

'Won't you have candles brought, Ma'am?' asked Agnes, entering my chamber. 'Only think, Ma'am,' continued she, 'if that good Mr. Murden is not going to send one of the grooms eight miles for a physician to come to the poor Indian, because the laundry maid, who is just returned from her, told him she is not any better. I believe there never was such a young gentleman.'

'Do you know where he is now?' said I.

'Gone to the stables, Ma'am, to hurry away the groom.'

'Is any one with him?'

'Only an old farmer, who has been in his dressing room while he dined. I dare say Mr. Murden has been doing some good thing or other for him too.'

'I hope he has,' replied I. *All that I have promised, I will perform, depend on it*, – I repeated to myself. 'Light me down stairs, Agnes,' said I. 'I hope, indeed, Mr. Murden has done him some kindness.'

Agnes looked at me attentively, and did not reply to me. I returned to the drawing room, divested of that pleasurable glow of feeling which I enjoyed before the voices spoke underneath my window.

As I entered the room, Lord Ulson was saying to my mother, 'such a reference as you propose, Madam, would be unpardonable from me, nor can we possibly expect the lady will be sincere.'

I was surprised to understand, from the Earl's bow, that I was the subject of their conversation; and I requested, that, if his Lordship meant me, he would hereafter never expect to find me insincere; and I begged to know I had merited the accusation.

Mrs. Ashburn and the Earl mutually explained. His Lordship was persuaded, it seems, that a letter exciting such visible pleasure as that did which the servant delivered to me must be from a

favoured lover. My mother was certain the effect was produced by my *romantic friendship*, to use her own expression; and, as the Earl was incredulous, she was desirous of referring the decision to me. Lady Laura affectedly begged I would defend the *sweet powers* of friendship; and my mother sneeringly observed, that I had a fine scope for my talents in the present instance.

I took your letter from my pocket. I unfolded and spread it open in my lap. 'This is the letter,' said I.

'A pretty hand,' said Colonel Ridson.

'Nay, it is not a female character, Miss Ashburn,' the Earl said.

I asked if I should read it; the Earl professed to admire my condescension, but my mother yawned.

I selected two passages from your letter, and read them. Lord Ulson, who had only chosen this subject for want of something to do, was now perfectly satisfied and convinced; for Sir Thomas had invited him to piquet. The Colonel thought your stile very charming. Lady Barlowe thought it very dull; and, as no one contradicted her ladyship's opinion, the subject would here have ended, had I not as I put the letter again into my pocket, told my mother that her friend Mrs. Valmont had lately been ill.

A poor inanimate vapoured being, Mrs. Ashburn called her friend; dying, she said, of diseases whose slightest symptom had never reached her, a burden to herself, and a torment to every one else; nevertheless her fate to be pitied, lamented, and deplored without bounds. Then it became your uncle's turn; and his sum of enormities was divided and subdivided into multitudes of sins, so that I was ready to ask myself if I had really ever known this Mr. Valmont. No one spark of pity remained for him. No: he was neither pitied by Mrs. Ashburn, nor prayed for by the Countess of Ulson.

When my mother had exhausted her topic, I said to her, 'Your pictures are vivid to-night, madam. Suppose you finish the family. Miss Valmont, what say you of her?'

'I leave her to you,' replied Mrs. Ashburn; 'I only think her a little handsome, a little proud, a little ignorant, and half insane. You can tell the rest.'

'Pray do, Miss Ashburn,' cried Lady Mary Bowden. 'I dearly love to hear of queer creatures.'

'I am to add,' said I, 'all that remains of a *queer creature*, already declared to be proud, ignorant, and half mad. – To the best of my judgment, I will. This – '

The door opened, and in came Mr. Murden; and the poor Indian, the country girl, and the old farmer who had wept sleepless nights for *Peggy's naughtiness*, together rushed upon my imagination. Again, Lady Laura made room for Murden; and again, he took his seat on the same sopha. I said to myself, as I looked at him, where are the signs of remorse? There are none. Not even the softened eye of new-born virtuous resolutions. Strange, that I read of nothing in that face but inward peace and freedom!

'Do go on, Miss Ashburn,' cried Lady Mary.

I did, Sibella, I began once more to speak of you; and, in a little time, I called back a part at least of the vigour and warmth which Murden's entrance and a train of fugitive thought had chased from me.

I began with your beauty: I omitted nothing which I could devise to make the picture worthy of the original. I spoke of the first sight I had of you; the impressive effect at that moment of your face, your form, your attitude, your simple attire. I appealed to my mother, to testify the singular beauty of your eyes, your forehead, your mouth, your hair. I told them that your hair had never been distorted by fashion; that, parted from the top of the head and always uncovered, it fell around your shoulder, displaying at once its profusion and its colour, and ornamenting, as well by its shade as its contrast, one of the finest necks that ever belonged to a human figure.

Lady Laura now grew restless in her seat; for Murden listened, he had even dropped a shuttle he had taken out of Lady Laura's hand, and either inattentively, or quite unconsciously, had allowed her ladyship to stoop to the ground for it herself. Still he listened.

'Thus adorned by nature,' said I, 'in what way shall I further recommend her? Art has disclaimed her. This *queer creature*, Lady Mary, never out of her uncle's castle since she was six years old, has been left utterly without the skill of the governess and waiting maid. An old tutor, indeed, gave her some singular lessons on the value of sincerity, independence, courage, and capacity; and she, a worthy scholar of such a teacher, as indeed you may judge from the specimen I read of her letter, has odd notions and practices; and, half insane, as Mrs. Ashburn says, would rather think herself born to navigate ships and build edifices, than to come into a world for no other purpose, than to twist her hair into ringlets, learn to be feeble, and to find her feet too hallowed to tread on the ground beneath her.'

'Stop!' cries Murden, bending eagerly forward, 'tell me, Miss Ashburn, of whom you speak.'

'Of a Miss Valmont,' said Lady Laura, peevishly. 'Miss Valmont!' rejoined Murden, 'Miss Ashburn, do you really speak of Miss Valmont?'

'I really do, Mr. Murden.'

He did not reply again; but, folding his arms, he leaned thoughtfully on the back of the sopha. Lady Laura, now quite out of temper, began to complain that he was an encumbrance; and, forgetting to offer the least apology, he instantly sprang up, and took a distant chair.

I should tell you that, by this time, my mother, Sir Thomas, the Earl, and the Colonel, were at cards, so that I had only Lady Barlowe and the younger part of the company for my auditors.

'And how,' asked Lady Mary, does this odd young lady (I must not again say queer creature) employ her time?'

'Playing with cats and dogs, and chattering with servants, I suppose,' said Lady Barlowe.

'No, Lady Barlowe,' I replied, 'the resources of her mind, *various* and *increasing*, to use her own description, furnish better expedients. She wishes for communication, for intercourse, for society; but she is too sincere to purchase any pleasure, by artifice and concealment; she is too proud to tempt the servants from their duty, all of whom, except two, are forbidden to approach her. A grey-headed unpolished footman, brings her breakfast and supper to her apartment. If she is there, it is well; if not, he leaves it, be the time longer or shorter till she does come. Her female domestic, deaf and deformed, would attend if summoned; but Miss Valmont finds her dress simple enough, and her limbs robust enough, to enable her to perform all the functions of her toilet. A true child of nature, bold in innocence, day or night is equally propitious to her rambles; and always mentally alive, she has the glow of animation on her cheeks, the fire of vivacity in her eye, alone in a solitary wood at noon-day or at midnight.'

'At midnight!' Lady Laura exclaimed, 'surely you did not go alone into the woods at midnight?'

I removed the idea her Ladyship and others perhaps had of its impropriety, by informing them your wood was of small extent, not distant from the castle, and inclosed within the moat, which, by means of a canal, had been carried round the park as well as castle. 'No human foot,' said I, 'but those admitted over the draw-bridge, can enter this wood, which though small is romantic, and though gloomy has its beauties. It rises on the side of the canal, and terminates at the foot of a rock. It contains a tomb. On one part of the rock are spread the tottering ruins of a small chapel and hermitage, and these objects serve to invite Miss Valmont to her wood, while they check the approach of diseased imaginations.'

I spoke further, Sibella, of your favourite lonely haunt, the flying speed with which I have seen you bound there, the affectionate caresses of your little fawn, and numberless other circumstances. Lady Laura was resolved neither to be amused by the novelty, nor seduced by the merit I had attributed to you. She found you more whimsical than pleasing; more daring than delicate. She wished you all manner of good things; and, among the rest, that you might not at last fall in love with one of your uncle's footmen.

I smiled and replied to her Ladyship, that your uncle's wisdom and foresight had provided against that misfortune. You already had a lover worthy of you.

'Good God! Are you acquainted with Clement Montgomery?'

It was Murden from whom this exclamation burst; and I looked at him without power to reply. It almost appeared miraculous, to hear any one in that room name Clement Montgomery.

'Is that the Mr. Montgomery,' Lady Barlowe asked, 'you went abroad with, Murden?'

'Yes, madam.'

'Then,' said I, 'you know Clement Montgomery intimately.'

He replied that he did.

'How could you be so cruel,' said I; 'why did you not interrupt me long since? You, who know Miss Valmont's lover, must know Miss Valmont also. Why did you not take the voice of that lover, and paint, as you must have heard him paint, her attractive graces, her noble qualities? Oh it was barbarous to leave that to be done by monotonous friendship, to which the spirit of love could alone do justice!'

Methinks his answer was a very strange one; so cold, so abrupt! I felt displeased at the moment; and checked myself in some eager question I was about to ask respecting Clement Montgomery. Murden's reply, Sibella, was, – That I had done enough: and he withdrew, too – immediately withdrew, as if weary of me and my subject.

At supper, his place at table was vacant. His valet alledged he was writing letters. Sir Thomas would be positive he was ill; we heard of nothing but *the fever*, and it is highly probable the house would have been presently half filled with physicians, and Sir Thomas really in need of them, if Murden had not come smiling and languishing into the supper room.

This time I had the honour of his choosing his seat next me; and, as I saw that he only pretended to eat in order to appease his uncle, I told him in a low voice I believed he was ill.

'My mind is my disease,' he said.

Ah, then, thought I, he does perhaps repent! I longed to talk to him, but I could think of no subject, no name but *Peggy*; and Peggy I had not courage to mention.

I made an awkward remark upon our ride to the water side; then I introduced as awkwardly, and to as little purpose, the time of my leaning out of my chamber window. Murden, unconscious of my meaning and allusions, heard me composedly; and I ended only where I began. He found me absent and embarrassed; and, though little suspecting that *his mind was* also *my disease*, his attentions were more exclusively mine, than I had ever before experienced them to have been.

A few minutes before the company separated, Murden said to me, 'I am informed, Miss Ashburn, that you intend visiting our poor Indian to-morrow morning.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I had ordered my horse early for that purpose.'

'I should request your permission to attend you, madam; but I am in some sort engaged to eat my breakfast on brown bread and new milk at a farm-house.'

'A farm-house!' said I.

'Yes, madam,' rejoined Murden, as calmly as though he had carried content and joy into that farm-house, instead of remorse and misery; 'Yes, madam, the most charming spot in this country. My constant house of call in the shooting season. Many pleasant brown bread breakfasts and suppers have I eaten there.'

So unblushing, so hard-hearted a confession absolutely startled me. I had already risen to retire, he rose also, and said, 'Will you, Miss Ashburn, allow me to ride with you in the morning?'

'And neglect the farm-house, Mr. Murden.'

He replied, 'the time is of little consequence, I can go there afterward.'

'Oh, but it is,' said I, '*now* of infinite consequence. Not for the world would I be the means of your dispensing with one title of your promises to that farm-house. Pray,' said I, turning back, after having bade him good night, 'Mr. Murden, do you correspond with Clement Montgomery?'

Again I became reconciled to him; again I was persuaded, that he repented of his error, and that he is not hardened in his transgressions, for he understood the fullest tendency of my question.

His countenance instantly expressed shame, surprise, and sorrow too; and his voice faultered while he said —

'Why, Miss Ashburn, why should you wish to know that?' And when he added, 'I do indeed, madam, correspond with Mr. Montgomery,' he looked from me.

My *good night* was more cordial than the former one; and I hope, that, if Murden finds his breakfast at the farm-house less pleasant than heretofore, its usefulness will increase, as its pleasure ceases.

Day-light bursts into my chamber. In another hour, I shall prepare to visit the Indian. My Sibella, farewel!

CAROLINE ASHBURN

LETTER VIII
FROM CLEMENT MONTGOMERY TO ARTHUR MURDEN

Infidel as thou art toward beauty, and indolent as thou art in friendship, whence dost thou still derive the power to attract the homage of beauty, and the zeal of friendship.

That Janetta, the Empress of all hearts, but callous thine, possessed sensibility, susceptibility, or even animation, thou, infidel Arthur, didst deny. Yet Janetta can sometimes torture her admiring Clement by the repetition of thy praises.

Four letters of mine, long letters, letters to which I yielded hours that might have been rapturous in enjoyments, those letters lie, the last as the first, unanswered, unheeded in thy possession.

I devoutly thank the star that shed its influence over the hour of my birth, that it gave me a temperament opposite to thine, Arthur: for, have I not seen thee more than insensible, even averse to the offered favours of the fair? Have I not seen thee yawn with listlessness at an assembly, where rank and splendor, the delights of harmony, and the fascinations of beauty, filled my every sense with exstacy? Give me the sphere of fashion, and its delights! Fix me in the regions of ever varying novelty!

Mine is life. I sail on an ocean of pleasure. Where are its rocks, its sands, its secret whirlpools, or its daring tempests? Fables all! Fables invented by the envious impotence of snarling Cynics, to crush the aspiring fancy of glowing youth! Thy apathy, Murden, I detest. Nay, I pity thee. And I swear by that pity, I would sacrifice some portion of my pleasures, to awaken thee to the knowledge of one hour's rapture.

Soul-less Arthur, how couldst thou slight the accomplished L – ? How could thou acknowledge that she was beautiful, yet tell me of her defects? – Defects! Good heaven! Defects, in a beautiful, kind, and yielding woman! – Arthur, Arthur, in compassion to thy passing youth, thy graceful figure, and all those manly charms with which thou art formed to captivate, forget thy wild chimeras, thy absurd dreams of romantic useless perfections; and make it thy future creed, that in woman there can be no crime but ugliness, no weakness nor defect but cruelty.

Every day, every hour, Janetta brings me new proof that thy judgment is worthless. She has tenderness, she has sensibility; she does not, as thou didst assert, receive my love merely to enrich herself with its offerings; and constancy she has, even more boundless than I (except for a time) could desire; for she talks of being mine for ever, and says, wherever I go thither will she go also.

And I will soothe her with the flattering hope. Why should I damp our present ardors, by anticipating the hour when we must part? Why should I suffuse those brilliant eyes with the tears of sorrow; or wound that fondly palpitating heart, by allowing her to suspect that she but supplies the absence of an all-triumphant rival?

Ah, let not my thoughts glance that way! Let not imagination bring before me the etherial beauty of my Sibella! Let it not transport me to her arms, within the heaven of Valmont wood! or I shall be left a form without a soul; and be excluded from the enjoyment that I now admire, as being in absence my solace, my happiness.

I expected I should have been dull without thee, Murden; but I hardly know, except when I am writing, that thou hast left me. I dress, I dance, I ride, I visit, I am visited. My remittances bring me all I wish, in their profusion. I adore, and am adored; the nights and days are alike devoted to an eternal round of pleasures; and lassitude and I are unacquainted.

'Read the hearts of men,' says Mr. Valmont. I cannot. I am fascinated with their manners. I pant to acquire the same soft polish; and their endearing complaisance to my endeavours.

That graceful polish is already thine; and, there, I envy thee. I envy too thy reputation; but I hate thy cold reserve. Why, if these triumphs which are attributed to thee be really thine, why conceal them? Others can tell me of thy successes, can show me the very objects for whom thou hast sighed, whom thou hast obtained. When I alledge that I found thee constantly dissatisfied, contemplating

some imaginary being, complaining that too much or too little pride, defective manners, or a defective mind, gave thee an antidote against love, I am assured that it was the mere effect of an overweening vanity. Seymour, who pretends to know thee much better than I do, declares thou art vain beyond man's belief or woman's example. He is thy sworn enemy; and well he may, provided his charges against thee be true, for the other night in the confidence of wine, he assured me, that thou art the seducer of his mistress. A mistress, fond and faithful, till she listened to thy seductions. Is it possible, Murden, thou canst have been thus dishonourably cruel? I doubt the veracity of Seymour's representation; for, I think thou are not only too strict for the transaction, but too inanimate to be assailed by the temptation.

Prithee, Arthur, banish this thy ever impenetrable reserve; and tell me truly, whether thou art inflated with victory; fastidious from change; or, whether, as I deem thee, thou are not really too cold to love; whether thou hast not cherished the indolent caprice of thy temper, till it has deadened thee into marble?

Once more, I thank heaven I am not like thee. Ever may I thrill at the glance, the smile of beauty! Ever may I live, to know no business but pleasure; and may my resources ever be as unconfined as my wishes!

CLEMENT MONTGOMERY

LETTER IX
FROM SIBELLA VALMONT TO CAROLINE ASHBURN

It is now a week since, one evening at sunset, I carried your letters, and that portrait painted by Clement in the days when we knew no sorrow, into the wood; where, shutting out every remembrance, save those of love and friendship, I was for a time wrapped in the sublimity of happiness. Is the mind so much fettered by its earthly clog the body, that it cannot long sustain these lofty flights, soaring as it were into divinity, but must ever sink back to its portion of pains and penalties? For, this I have before experienced; and, at the time of which I speak, pain and grief suddenly burst in upon me. I rushed from the foot of my oak to the monument; and, resting there, wept with a bitterness equal in degree to my former pleasure.

Nina was at my side – and her flying from me into the wood, was a signal that some one approached. I raised my head; and beheld, descending from the Ruin on the Rock, the tall figure of a venerable man, with a white and flowing beard. He was wrapped in a sort of loose gown; a broad hat shaded part of his face; his step was feeble; he frequently tottered; and, when he had come near to me, he leaned both hands on his staff, and addressed me thus.

'Fair virgin, weep not! The spirits of the air gather round you; and form a band so sacred, that the malignant demons hover at a distance, hopeless of approach. Your guardian angel presides over this grove. Here, Mildew, Mischief, and Mischance, cannot harm you. Fair virgin weep not!' He paused, I said, 'Who are you?'

'Once,' he continued, 'I was the hallowed tenant of yon ruined mansion; once, an inhabitant of earth, it was my lot to warn the guilty, and to soothe the mourner. Well may such tears as thine draw me back to earth. I come, the spirit of consolation. Fair virgin, why weepest thou?'

'I know,' I said, 'that the sleep of death is eternal. That the grave never gives back, to form and substance, the mouldering body; and it indeed matters little to me who or what you are, since I well know you cannot be what you would seem.'

I stepped down from the monument; and turned up the wood path, leading to the castle.

'Stay,' cried he. 'Do you doubt my supernatural mission? – View my testimony. Behold, I can renovate old age!'

I looked back, the beard, the hat, the mantle were cast aside; and a young man of graceful form and fine physiognomy appeared before me.

I stood, an instant, in surprise; and then, I again turned toward the castle. He stepped forward, and intercepted my path with outspread arms.

'Fear me not,' said he. 'I – '

'No,' I answered. 'I do not fear you, though I know of no guardian angels but my innocence and fortitude.'

He folded his arms, fixed his eyes upon the ground, and I passed on without further interruption.

When Andrew brought supper into my apartment, I asked if there were strangers in the castle; and Andrew shook his head, by which I understood that he did not know if there were any.

The following morning, I expected my uncle's commands to absent myself from the wood; and though no message came, I did absent myself, both on that day and on the succeeding day and their nights, confining all my walks to the open ground behind the castle and the lawn.

During these two days, I was attended only by Margaret. Poor Andrew was indisposed. Banished from my oak, deprived of my Nina's society, excluded even from the slight intercourse the table afforded with Mr. and Mrs. Valmont (for my uncle has lately determined, that it is an indelicate custom to meet together at stated times for the sole purpose of eating; and refreshment is now served up to each in our separate apartments) it is nearly impossible to tell you, Caroline, how much *alone* I felt myself, while these two days and two nights lasted.

The third day was bleak and stormy; the wind roared; and showers fell frequently. Every one of this household seems at all times loath to encounter such inclemencies, and I imagined that to me alone these were things of little moment. I went, therefore, to the wood; but, ere Nina had expressed half her joy, the stranger appeared.

'Why fly me,' he said, 'if you do not fear me?'

'I shun you,' replied I, 'because I do not understand you.'

'But, if you shun me, you cannot understand me.'

'I do not deem you worthy of enquiry,' I said; 'for you came with pretences of falsehood and guile, and those are coverings that virtue ever scorns.'

'Fair philosopher,' he exclaimed, 'teach me how you preserve such vigour, such animation, where you have neither rivalship to sustain, nor admiration to excite? Are you secluded by injustice from the world? Or, do you willingly forsake its delights, to live the life of hopeless recollection? Say, does the beloved of your soul sleep in that monument?'

The supposition, Caroline, was for an instant too agonizing; and I called twice on the name of Clement, with a vehemence that made this man start. His face flushed with colour; he retreated a few steps, and looked every way around him.

'No,' said I, as he again approached, 'my beloved lives. Our beings are incorporate as our wishes. The sepulchre need not open twice. No tyranny could separate us in death. But who are you,' I added, 'that come hither to snatch from me the moments I would dedicate to remembrances of past pleasure, and to promising expectation?'

'Is then your heart so narrowed by love, that it can admit neither friendship nor benevolence?'

I answered, 'To my friendship you have no claim; for, we are not equal. You wear a mask. Esteem and unreserved confidence are the only foundations of friendship.'

As he had done on the former day, he again intercepted my path; for I was going to quit the wood.

'Stay,' he said, 'and hear me patiently; or I may cast a spell around you!'

He interrupted the reply I was beginning to make, thus – 'I do not bid you fear me. My power is not terrible, but it is mighty. Tell me, then,' he added, 'have you no sense of the blessings of intercourse? Have you never reflected on the selfishness of solitude, on the negative virtues of the recluse?'

'I find you here,' said I, 'in Mr. Valmont's wood; and I expect, therefore, that you already know my seclusion is not the effect of my choice.'

'But from whom, other than yourself, am I to learn why it is the effect of your submission?'

This was a question, Caroline, which I had never steadily put to myself; and I stood silent some moments before I found my answer.

I said, 'I am not yet convinced that the time is arrived when my submission ought to cease.'

'Ah, rather, honestly confess,' he replied, 'that you shun a stern contention with that power which here detains you. But there are other means. A secret escape. If you resolve to exert yourself for that purpose – '

'No,' I said, 'I am not weak enough to descend to artifice. Did I think it right to go, I should go openly. Then might Mr. Valmont try his opposing strength. But he would find, I could leap, swim, or dive; and that moats and walls are feeble barriers to a determined will.'

'Oh, stay, stay in these woods for ever!' he vehemently exclaimed. 'Go not into the world, where artifice might assail and example corrupt that noble sincerity. Or if, as I think, your courage, your integrity, are incorruptible. Oh yet, go not into the world! View not its disgusting follies! Taste not its chilling disappointments!'

My answer was: 'I am accustomed to listen to inconsistencies. You just now, spoke of the pleasures and blessings of society.'

As he did not reply, but stood as though he was musing, I thought I could pass him, which I attempted to do. He immediately knelt on one knee before me; spread one hand on his bosom, and said —

'You are above my controul. I would not dare profane you, by the single touch of my finger. But I beseech you, by that firmness, that innocence which holds distrust and danger at defiance, I beseech you listen to me a few short moments longer.'

'Have you any thing to impart which can interest me?' I asked him.

'I have that which ought to interest you.' – He rose from his kneeling posture, and appeared to hesitate. 'Alas,' he then added, 'I have many many faults! I am unstable in wise resolutions; and yielding, as childhood, to temptation. I wanted a guide, a monitor. I sought one in the world, and found only tempters. I have quitted the world. I have chosen my abode in that Ruin. There I would fain learn to amend myself. I want to learn to be happy. But I come not to that Ruin, to banish you from this wood. This is your selected spot; and that is mine. Only a few paces divides them. Yet, if you say it must be so, the distance shall be as impassable as though entire kingdoms lay between us. Ah, reflect a moment before your single word forms this immense barrier! – A moment did I say? – No: reflect a day. Leave me now in silence; and return to-morrow, the next day, when you will, and then tell me, if you could not sometimes find me a more sympathizing auditor than trees and marble, when you would breathe complaint, or utter joy. Go then. But – '

A second time he hesitated; and, when he spoke again, his articulation was changed from its clear decisive character to a thicker lower utterance.

'Be aware,' he said, 'that there are certain requisites necessary to form the utility of my solitude: Uninterrupted retirement, and perfect secresy.'

Was I unjust, Caroline? but his mention of secresy instantly filled my mind with a supposition that his words wore one form, and his intentions another. I warned him to depart. I told him, I despised concealment; that I had ever scorned to separate my wishes from my acts, or my actions from my words. I said, his caution pointed out my duty. I bade him, as I then thought a final adieu.

I proceeded immediately to the library, to relate this conversation to my uncle. There I was told, that my uncle was gone from the castle, not to return till four days were past. I then requested to be admitted into Mrs. Valmont's dressing room, and she received me.

Her conduct disgusted me extremely at the time; and I have since thought it very extraordinary, that Mrs. Valmont should doubt my veracity. Scarcely had I described the manner in which the person in the wood first came to me, than Mrs. Valmont broke my narration by asking me over and over again, I know not how many times – 'Had I indeed seen a hermit come out of the Ruin? – Was I quite sure I had seen him? – Could it really be true!' Not disposed to hear such offensive repetitions, I declined entering any further into the story; and merely said, that, if the person was a visitor in the castle, it might be proper for her to signify to him that his intrusion in the Rock and wood would be displeasing to my uncle, and highly inconvenient to me.

I went to my own apartments.

On the next morning, I rose as I frequently do, at the first dawn of day – Do you recollect the situation of my apartments? You will certainly remember, that the south-west wing is rather distant from that part of the body of the castle where most of the family inhabit. You know too that my rooms open into a long gallery; but you never explored this gallery. My hours with you were rich in pleasure and variety; and I thought not then of the solitary haunts to which I fly, when I seek amusement and find none.

This gallery, at the remote end from the body of the castle, closes with a stair case. These stairs descend into a narrow and winding passage of the West Tower, and lead to the door of the Armoury. It is probable you never saw either the West Tower or the Armoury. They are both out of repair, and altogether out of use; nor do I recollect any that I ever saw one of the family enter them but Clement and myself.

In very tempestuous weather, the Armoury was a favourite place of resort for us. The various implements and cases of steel with which it is furnished, were subjects of wonder and conjecture; besides, it is a hall of large dimensions, and we possessed it so free of interruptions, that it served better for play and recreation than any other apartment we were allowed to frequent within the castle.

At a very early hour on the succeeding morning, as I before said, I rose and left my chamber, to walk in the Armoury. After I had gone down the stairs, and as I had nearly reached the end of the dark stone passage, I heard a sudden creaking noise; but whether or not it proceeded from the Armoury I could not be certain. I entered the Armoury. The door closed heavily after me. There was scarcely light enough to distinguish the surrounding objects. – I stood still. – But all was silent.

I walked about; and other thoughts entirely effaced an impression of something unusual in the noise; till, again, and in a louder degree, it assailed me. I hastened toward the door, but the voice I had heard in the wood called me to stay. I turned round, and the same figure was before me.

Andrew interrupts me. My uncle is returned home; has something to communicate; and expects me now. I go.

In continuation.

Farewel, thou precious resemblance I must part with thee. From yesterday, until the present hour, thou hast been mine. Farewel, then, exquisite shadow!

Caroline, I left my letter unfinished, yesterday; and hastened to the library.

'Come hither, child,' my uncle said as I entered; 'and tell me if this be a likeness.'

He presented to me a small case, and I beheld the picture of Clement. I folded both hands over it on my bosom. I had not words to thank Mr. Valmont; but the tears that rolled upon my cheeks were tears of gratitude.

'I ordered Clement,' my uncle continued, 'to send me his portrait, done by an eminent artist; and his obedience has been as prompt as I could desire. You may retire, Sibella, and take the picture with you; but you are to bring it back to the library to-morrow after my dinner hour.'

Only, conceive, Caroline, how I flew back to my apartment. Think how many fond avowals, how many rapturous caresses, I bestowed on the insensible image. While I eat, it lay before me; and while I slept, the little that I did sleep, it rested on my pillow.

I have counted the stroke of five, from the great clock. Now Mr. Valmont dines; and the picture is no longer mine. I have placed it in its case, ready for the hand of Mr. Valmont. I become dispirited. Farewel, precious shadow!

Farewel, also, Caroline to you!

SIBELLA VALMONT

I have torn the seal away from this letter! I am breathless with the tidings! Clement, my Clement, is to return! Oh, Caroline, Caroline, did you ever weep for joy?

LETTER X
FROM CAROLINE ASHBURN TO SIBELLA VALMONT

Certainly, a picture is at all times a very pretty toy; and I can readily imagine, that the picture of an absent lover must be indeed a precious blessing; but you will forgive me, Sibella, if I honestly confess that I have a hundred times, since the receipt of your letter, wished Clement had not been so willing, or his artist not so ready.

Oh, that Mr. Valmont had withheld the picture but one hour longer! Then would the womanish curiosity of Caroline Ashburn have been gratified. For, trust me, Sibella, your surprise at finding your enigmatical hermit in the Armoury could not exceed my disappointment at leaving him and you there without further explanation.

I have imagined and imagined; returned to the subject; and quitted it again, more wearied than before; and, though I did, after a time, discover that I never should, by the mere aid of suppositions, find of what materials your hermit is composed, yet I have persisted in comparing accidents, and combining circumstances perhaps totally remote from each other, with the vain hope of tracing him. Knowing how much your uncle worships mystery, I sometimes think it may be one of his stratagems; – sometimes that – Psha! The folly of conjecture grows with me.

Pardon me, Sibella, you are above these things. Uniform in rectitude, you steadily pursue the path before you; nor mislead yourself to follow the swervings of others. In compassion, however, to the longings of your friend, hasten to communicate the remainder of this your adventure.

Our poor Indian is dead. She survived her reception at Barlowe Hall only about ten days; and, during the visits I made her, I never found her capable of sustaining any conversation with me. From her, as she was long a resident in the family, I hoped and expected to have been informed by what means my father amassed his fortune: for, the suspicions which I find generally attached to East Indian riches sit heavy on my mind. I do not love to encourage suspicion, for it is cowardly; nor can I indeed fairly give my opinions the name of suspicions, for I am persuaded, that in whatever clime or country it be found, the mind that grasps at such inordinate wealth must be vicious, and that there can be but little to choose among the degrees of vice wherewith it is obtained. Yet, being convinced as to that point, I still wish to know the employments of my father's life: for it is possible there may be some retribution to make to individuals. A voyage to India for such a purpose, Sibella, would be but as a pleasant summer day's excursion.

Your letter has been sent after me to Bath, for Barlowe Hall no longer retains her circle of gay visitors. The Ulson family have gone I forget where, and taken the Winderhams with them, while we, together with Sir Thomas, Lady Barlowe, and Colonel Ridson, arrived at Bath last week. The season is crowded, and my mother and the nabob think themselves fortunate in having been able to secure one large and commodious house for the reception of both families.

This arrangement Lady Barlowe and Mrs. Ashburn profess to find very pleasing. They declare a violent friendship for each other; and use it as a cloak for the workings of their secret malignities. My mother is the object of Lady Barlowe's envy: for the nabob's fears have made him covetous; he hoards his diamonds in their cases; and Lady Barlowe's glitter is out-glared by the happier uncontrouled Mrs. Ashburn.

On the other hand, Lady Barlowe has youth, and has beauty; and these attractions Mrs. Ashburn finds the lustre of the diamond will not altogether outshine, though there are many among the venal crowd, who daily offer up at the shrine of wealth the incense due to merit, wit, and beauty.

Sir Thomas, I believe, considers himself as bound to play both his own part and his nephew's; and to overwhelm us with the attentions and kindnesses, his ungracious Arthur withheld.

Did I not tell you, or rather did I not intimate, that before Mr. Murden made his appearance amongst us, the Baronet evidently bestowed him upon me? but, alas, scarcely had he arrived, when

his uncle, remembering the value of a certain old proverb, left me to seek another lover; and gave or would have given his all-prized nephew to my mother.

It was highly whimsical to see the Baronet's labours to promote this end. He dared not be quite certain, that Murden, although dependent on him, would yield him an implicit obedience; and yet, according to his understanding, the scheme had so many and such important recommendations, that they were not to be hastily rejected. Fearing to be out-talked, if not convinced, should he at once resort to his nephew's opinion, the Baronet would not venture to do so; but, secure in the presence of numbers, he grew bold at hint, and soon made his plan fully comprehended by every person present; and put his nephew's ingenuity to the trial to find methods how to express his disapprobation, without being rude and offensive to the feelings of any one. I cannot say that Mrs. Ashburn appeared to think Sir Thomas very absurd in his designs.

After playing this game of hint, till the party talked of separating, the Baronet then acquired courage enough to make a direct attack on his nephew; the latter gave an explicit refusal to the proposal; and the former for some days lost his good humour and his patience.

It was, I suppose, in consequence of this marked displeasure from his uncle, that Murden thought of paying a visit to a friend at some distance from Barlowe Hall. At first, Sir Thomas opposed it not; but when Murden was actually on the point of going, the nabob relaxed his solemn displeasure, and earnestly requested Arthur not to leave him. Arthur, in his turn, became inflexible, and would not be intreated. He had written, he said to his friend, and go he must. At length, however, he condescendingly offered to hasten to join us at Bath; and, having thus accommodated their difference, the nabob and his nephew parted very good friends.

This serious altercation on the subject of Mr. Murden's quitting our party, took place in the breakfast parlour. Lady Mary Bowden invited me soon after to walk with her.

'Don't you think,' said she, putting her arm through mine, as soon as we had crossed the threshold of the Hall door, 'that Murden is very obstinately bent on making this excursion?'

'I think him determined,' answered I; 'and perhaps very properly so.'

'Thereby hangs a tale,' said Lady Mary.

'I don't love tales, Lady Mary.'

She looked at me, and smiled. 'Yet, I believe you are willing to hear this,' she said, 'and I am resolved to tell it you.'

Lady Mary certainly did not lay that to my charge, of which I was undeserving; for I quietly suffered her to proceed in her story. It was an accusation against Murden, that his pretended visit of friendship to Mr. Villier was in fact a visit of a different kind, to a female in Mr. Villier's neighbourhood, of whom Lady Mary said Murden had not been the original seducer; that she had been lured from her friends by another person, and that having preferred the attractions of Murden, she made a pretence of returning to her friends, in order to be the more conveniently under his protection.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.