

DANGEROUS LIASONS

MM

Is that you? You're early.

Vicomte

Am I? I wanted to ask you: that story you told me, how did it end?

MM

I'm not sure I know what you mean.

Vicomte

Well, once this friend of yours had taken the advice of his lady-friend, did she take him back?

MM

Am I to understand . . . ?

Vicomte

The day after our last meeting, I broke with Madame de Tourvel. On the grounds that it was beyond my control.

MM

You didn't!

Vicomte

I certainly did.

MM

Seriously?

Vicomte

On my honour.

MM

But how wonderful of you. I never thought you'd do it.

Vicomte

It seemed pointless to delay.

MM

With the anticipated results?

Vicomte

She was prostrate when I left. I called back the following day.

MM

You went back?

Vicomte

Yes, but she declined to receive me.

MM

You don't say.

Vicomte

Subsequent enquires I made established that she had withdrawn to a convent.

MM

Indeed.

Vicomte

And she's still there. A very fitting conclusion, really. It's as if she'd been widowed. (*He reflects for a moment, then turns to MM, radiating confidence.*) You kept telling me my reputation was in danger, but I think this may well turn out to be my most famous exploit. I believe it sets a new standard. I think I could confidently offer it as a challenge to any potential rival for my position. Only one thing could possibly bring me greater glory.

MM

What's that?

Vicomte

To win her back.

MM

You think you could?

Vicomte

I don't see why not.

MM

I'll tell you why not: because when one woman strikes at the heart of another, she seldom misses; and the wound is invariably fatal.

Vicomte

Is that so?

MM

I'm so convinced it's so, I'm prepared to offer any odds you care to suggest against your success. (*Some of the self-satisfaction has ebbed out of Vicomte's expression.*) You see, I'm also inclined to see this as one of my greatest triumphs.

Vicomte

There's nothing a woman enjoys as much as a victory over another woman.

MM

Except, you see, Vicomte, my victory wasn't over her.

Vicomte

Of course it was, what do you mean?

MM

It was over you. (*Long silence. The fear returns to Vicomte's eyes. He begins to look concerned. MM has never seemed more serene.*) That's what's so amusing. That's what's so genuinely delicious.

Vicomte

You don't know what you're talking about.

MM

You loved that woman, Vicomte. What's more you still do. Quite desperately. If you hadn't been so ashamed of it, how could you possibly have treated her so viciously? You couldn't bear even the vague possibility of being laughed at. And this has proved something I've always suspected. That vanity and happiness are incompatible. (*Vicomte is very shaken. He's forced to make a great effort, before he can resume, his voice a touch ragged with strain.*)

Vicomte

Whatever may or may not be the truth of these philosophical speculations, the fact is it's now your turn to make a sacrifice.

MM

Is that right?

Vicomte

Danceney must go.

MM

Where?

Vicomte

I've been more than patient about this little whim of yours, but enough is enough and I really must insist you call a halt to it.

MM

One of the reasons I never remarried, despite a quite bewildering range of offers, was the determination never again to be ordered around. I decided if I felt like telling a lie, I'd rather do it for fun than because I had no alternative. So I must ask you to adopt a less marital tone of voice.

Vicomte

She's ill, you know. I've made her ill. For you sake. So the least you can do is get rid of that colourless youth.

MM

I should have thought you'd have had enough of bullying women for the time being.
(Vicomte's face hardens.)

Vicomte

Right. I see I shall have to make myself very plain. I've come to spend the night. I shall not take at all kindly to being turned away.

MM

I am sorry. I'm afraid I've made other arrangements. *(A grim satisfaction begins to enliven Vicomte's features.)*

Vicomte

Ah. I knew there was something. Something I had to tell you. What with one thing and another, it had slipped my mind.

MM

What?

Vicomte

Danceney isn't coming over. Not tonight.

MM

What do you mean? How do you know?

Vicomte

I know because I've arranged for him to spend the night with Cecile. *(He smiles charmingly.)* Now I come to think of it, he did mention he was expected here. But when I put it to him that he really would have to make a choice, I must say he didn't hesitate for a second. He knew his mind.

MM

And now I know yours.

Vicomte

He's coming to see you tomorrow to explain and to offer you, do I have this right, yes, I think so, his eternal friendship. As you said, he's completely devoted to you.

MM

That's enough, Vicomte.

Vicomte

You're absolutely right. Shall we go up?

MM

Shall we what?

Vicomte

Go up. Unless you prefer, this, if memory serves, rather purgatorial sofa.

MM

I believe it's time you were going. (*Silence.*)

Vicomte

No. I don't think so. We made an arrangement. I really don't think I can allow myself to be taken advantage of a moment longer.

MM

Remember I'm better at this than you are.

Vicomte

Perhaps. But it's always the best swimmers who drown. Now. Yes or no? Up to you, of course. I wouldn't dream of trying to influence you. I therefore confine myself to remarking that a no will be regarded as a declaration of war. So. One single word is all that's required.

MM

All right.

MM

War.