

PART I

Letter I

From my Tomb. London. Morning, 1 February 1779.¹

Never! That word is my death sentence. It has emerged from your mouth; it is sacred; it banishes me, and my fate is decided.

You, the charm of my life, do not know how you might be, and how you ought to be, loved. Alone in the world, I know that, and alone in the world, I love you as you ought to be loved. A profound sentiment makes me see beauty, charm and joy in you alone. You have condemned me never to hope.

I adore your decree, Hortense. But despair entered my heart at the moment when you pronounced the fatal word, *Never!*

I have no complaint against you, Hortense; you could not love me, and I could not live without being yours. It is necessary to end it! But I love you with so much attachment, such a great regret in ceasing to see you, that I don't want to end it in a moment; I want to feel myself dying, and every day, for a year, make you the sacrifice of my life, to write you a letter every day, which you will perhaps read when I am no more.

Oh, if I could flatter myself, if I could hope that my thought would pass into your hope, that your eyes would drink the tears that moisten this paper...but no. Learn, if you read this one day, that the poison is here...that it is slow...that I shall, in a moment, before finishing this letter, feel a principle of death passing through me...

Alas, that frightful idea of the annihilation of thought is much less so that the horrible word *Never!* that you have just pronounced...

It is done; I shall not live longer than a year. In a year, to the day, the most unfortunate of men, gradually consumed, will render his last sigh...

Is there a means of living after death? That is what preoccupies me. Yes I see morals in it, at least. It is necessary to take them.

There is no more time...no more remedy. I shall cease to be at a known term. But each of my last days will be consumed for you. Every day, it is to you that I shall immolate myself. You, who would and could have been the charm of my life, and who are...shall I say the torment? No, I take pleasure in dying for you...pity me!

My heart hurts. Death is I my bosom. Oh, it will take too long to come. Oh, my poor heart, calm down! It's she who has vivified you; it is she who will extinguish you. When I sense the first pain, I shall say to myself: It is the thrust of the cruel Hortense, and her *Never!* is piercing my heart...!

The unfortunate de Fontlhète.

¹ This probably ought to be the date of the day after the pronouncement of the fateful "Never," according to the last section of the text, not the date on which the letter is supposedly sent or received, as earlier suggested, but the pretence appears to have been forgotten by the time the responses were inserted into the text.

Response to Letter I

17 February, Paris

O my dear husband, what a scene you recall to me! If your letter were not agreed, it would be frightful! But it is, on the contrary, a proof of our love, and the sentiments that you have always had for me.

By chance, it remained open on my desk while I was dressing. Madame de Marigny came in and read it. She came to me, terrified.

“Oh my friend, what has happened? This letter—I’ve read it!”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“So much the better, for it frightened me.”

And I let her understand that it was the story of something old. She loves me, that adorable Marquise. She isn’t happy. She is only sensible to the unfortunate. So beautiful, and suffers rejections! From whom? From a man who isn’t worthy of her!

Your son is calling me. I quit you for yourself.

Your wife,

Hortense.

Letter II

From my tomb. London, 2 February,

A fire is alight in my veins. Oh, perhaps it will calm the one that is devouring my soul! Yes, I believe that it will calm it. Since this morning's sacrifice, a kind of peace, unknown for a long time, seems to have been introduced into my heart. In spite of you, Hortense, I have been able to establish a relationship between you and me. I am your victim...I am *yours*...

That word is perhaps not without sweetness for the man who adores you. You could not love me: Nature, perhaps reason, seemed to demand it, but honor forbade it. If, instead of the terrible *Never!* that you pronounced the day before yesterday, you had said to me: "Fontlhète, I leave it to you: ought I to imprint a stain on my life and respond to your love?" I would have replied, without hesitation or disguise, firmly: "No, you ought not to do that." And if you had added: "Well, Fontlhète, if I see you, if you live, if you love me, I sense that I shall not have the strength to resist; I shall break my oath; I shall become culpable toward social law, and I shall lose honor"—if, as I say, you had spoken to me thus, I would have fled, in order to conserve that honor, in order not to imprint the slightest stain upon that masterpiece of Nature; I would have done what I did yesterday...

Oh, flattering chimera, which comes to occupy me with your suppositions, you charm my dolor! Alas, that delightful and charming cause, which would have made me drink the cup of death avidly, is only that...of despair...frightful despair has presented itself to me, and has forced me to drink to the dregs! I am no longer in despair, since I have yielded to it: a sweet and consoling thought seems to bring balm into my blood: I shall cease to be for Her!

She is the cause; I shall be the effect.

A sentiment like mine, my dear Hortense, ought to astonish! It's necessary for you to know the story. It will be the subject matter of the two letters that follow. For two years I have adored you. Each letter will present the story of two days. O consoling idea! If ever the beautiful Hortense reads me, I shall try to get those letters to her one by one. She will bring together, in a single instant, four years, the two past, of which I shall describe every day what happened, the one in which I am writing, and the one in which she is reading. Thus I am prolonging my existence, I am quadrupling it, and I sense happiness at this moment. Do not pity me, Hortense! You have not made me unhappy. Have no regrets, nor repentance; the word *Never!* that you pronounced was for you a duty! You are just, and I am being punished for not having loved you as you merited being loved.

Until tomorrow; I shall commence the history of my sentiments. I am leaving for Florence.

Response to Letter II

18 February.

You are commencing from now on the history of your sentiments. There could not be anything more agreeable for your wife, and the mother of your son. You are always sure of interesting me by that means. Your letter has the art of making the most cruel reproaches seem sweet and flattering, after the cause has been annihilated by our marriage. The more bitter they are in the distance, the sweeter they are at the moment they are made by the husband to the tender wife, who speaks of the desperate lover and the severe, cruel mistress as if of imaginary individuals. Continue, dear husband, in the same tone. It is delightful for your wife.

I am hardly attending to any business. I always put things off. But your man of confidence is taking care of everything.

Letter III

From my tomb. London. 3 February.

It was on the third of February 1777 that I saw you for the first time at the ball given by the Venetian Ambassador. Until that moment, who had hidden you from my gaze? Why had the star of my happiness not been visible to me?

All eyes were fixed upon you. Some praised the perfection of your figure, others the regularity of your features. Some praised your dark, soft and shining eyes, others your dainty mouth. You were admired from head to foot. A woman added the eulogy: "She has more qualities and virtues than attractions!" I shuddered.

I drew nearer. The holy knot of marriage by which I knew you were bound, penetrated me with respect. It was not a profane love that I felt for you. I wanted to adore you, as the masterpiece of wisdom and reason. So I drew closer. Do you remember, Hortense, the first words I spoke to you?

You had just sat down; your gaze was wandering, without settling on anyone. It came toward me, when I opened my mouth.

"Madame..." I stopped. My ideas became blurred. It seemed to me that your gaze was dissolving my thoughts, as ardent glass dissolves metals.

You looked at me; I thought it was with a sort of interest.

I became bolder. I began again. "Madame, every heart..." But I could not finish.

You smiled; the fire of your eyes was tempered.

"Madame," I resumed, "every heart brings you the purest of tributes."

I thought I had finished a long speech. I fell silent; I admired you—but I dared not raise my dazzled eyes as far as yours.

"Sit down, Monsieur."

How sweet those words appeared to me! Alas, it was only pity. I dared not sit down. I looked at our hands, your arms. You stood up. I followed you, as Charmant follows Lucinde in *L'Oracle*.² You left, and I felt that you were my soul.

On the third of February the following year, there was no ball. But I wanted to see you, in order to celebrate the anniversary of what I called my happiness. I knew that you were dining with Monsieur d'Ormond.³ I was not invited, but I could render a visit after dinner. I made certain not to fail. There was a game of Lotto—a harming game. I would never love anyone but you.

Mademoiselle de Saint-Josse, Monsieur d'Ormond's niece, invited me to sit with you. How dear she became to me! I loved her almost as much as you. We only talked about trivia, and never, never, had I ever heard trivia so witty, so melodious, and so divine! I drew 69 three times in succession.

"I love 69," you said. "It often comes up for me."

What! Love could, therefore, form of a 69, an ambe, a quaterne, a quine,⁴ a discourse more tender than the elegies of Tibullus! That game did not go on long enough. I can never recall it without shivering. I bought one the next day. I played alone, as soon as I had a moment. Love occupied your place. Oh, what a pleasure I experienced when one of the numbers came up that I had had with you—69, for example.

On the third of February this year, I am writing to you, and I am penetrated by the pleasures of the two preceding years.

On the third of February, in a year's time...I shall no longer be...but you will! Oh, might you read this letter, and honor it with a sigh!

² *L'Oracle* is a one-act comedy fantasy by Germain de Saint-Foix (1698-1776), first produced and published in 1740, and revived many times thereafter.

³ A Monsieur and Madame d'Ormond feature in Restif's early novel *La Fille naturelle* (1769).

⁴ These terms refer to three of the numerous formations of numbers that could be claimed as winners in the game of Loto or Loterie [Lotto], the ancestor of the British pastime of Bingo.

Response to Letter III

19 February.

That story of our meeting at the ball, dear husband, has stirred my heart prodigiously. Oh, how dear it is, everything that relates to a unique passion! You combine with that what you felt the following year, at Mademoiselle Saint-Josse's Lotto game. It seems, my love, that you read my heart, to know what interests me. That game was nothing. Its numbers were boring; but my love's tone, the quarrels he and Mademoiselle Saint-Josse had, that is what interests me, by reminding me of those times of amour and palpitations! Amour that I dared not admit to myself, and which I sensed so keenly!

(The rest is mundane.)

Letter IV

From my tomb. 4 February.

On the fourth of February, and the night that had preceded it, I thought of nothing but you. But it was a charming idea. I don't know what vague and flattering hope brought charm into my soul. My chain was already too strong to be broken, but I loved caring it; I loved feeling it. I tried to see you, and as everything favors us in the commencement of a passion, I saw you, and I saw you smiling. That is to say how beautiful you were. You only addressed one word to me, but it was honest. An honest word, said to a lover, on the second day, is a favor.

I arranged my plan in my head. It was sage, for I had to adore you without you knowing, without disturbance, without desire, without jealousy. It was madness; it was making arrangements to have a violent amour, without amour!

But that error did not last. Why did it not last forever?

Already, it no longer existed on the fourth of February of the following year. I recalled the divine game of the previous evening, the Lotto calumniated by insensitive souls. They never played it with an adored woman!

But during that session, I had sensed your charms; a deceptive dream made you tender, touched, responsive to confessions, which I dared to form, for the first time, in the liberty of sleep.

Who could express the enchantment of a happy dream? O beneficent Nature, you give us, in dreams, a foretaste of the idea of perfect happiness, of the happiness that awaits us after the detachment of the bonds of the body. Make haste, fortunate liberty! A charming idea, which makes me summon, and makes me desire, death. Oh, how precious you are to me! You extend over my destruction a balsamic liniment of pleasure, and you give me to drink, when I am destroyed, the nectar of immortality!

On the fourth of February this year, those ideas delight me at the moment when I sense...the first thrust of the stiletto of death...

Hortense, I am not writing to you to make you sad, but to prove to you that, in dying for love, I die happy...death alone can console me for the frightful misfortune of being unable to be yours.

On the fourth of February next year...oh, beautiful Hortense, who knows? Perhaps my detached soul will be fluttering around yours. Perhaps it will be your tutelary genius. How happy I would be if I could deflect the pains, the cares and the chagrins of my celestial beloved...

Will you see me, beautiful Hortense? Surely, I will not be far away from you, in a year, at the moment when you are reading me. I shall no longer be unhappy.

Souls are not, as that fellow Homer tells us, pusillanimous individuals who regret corporeal life prosaically. They are lively, cheerful, devoid of needs, devoid of shackles. Such will be my lot. I insist today on that consoling idea. Reach out your arms to me when you read this, and I shall precipitate myself into them, invisibly. I shall think: *Hortense I adore you!*—because a pure spirit can do that without crime.

Response to Letter IV

20 February

So, my dear husband, you have hope? What has given it to you, if not the electric fluid of amour, which communicates from your soul to mine, and from mine to yours? How these delightful commentaries on a veritable distant passion become less distant. One knows what they are, but when one responds to them here, subsequently, by reflection, it is a delightful sensation. You combine, in your stories, the past, the present and the future. Agree that the idea is new, and that you are the only one who has had it. So, I do not believe that any love had ever equaled yours or mine...

The somber idea of an annihilation that is not seems romantic to me, and worthy of Young.⁵

(The rest of the letter is mundane.)

⁵ Edward Young's *Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* (1742) was a great favorite in pre-Revolutionary Parisian salon culture.

Letter V

From my tomb. 5 February.

I had made my arrangements the day before and I was happy in my love, by virtue of the delightful sentiment I experienced. Are there, then, circumstances in which one is happy in love, independent of the beloved object?

I am writing, beautiful Hortense, in order to disguise my situation from you! But is it delicate to make you perceive it? No, I do not have the vanity...no, no, do not observe it...

But what if she does? a secret voice said to me.

No, no, she hasn't...

I was, then, happy thanks to you, but without you. And you knew it, Madame, better than anyone. Without your confession, I was proud of my choice. I said to myself: *Fontlhète, you are not a vulgar man. You love the finest of women!*

The following fifth of February...

Alas, she belongs to another, I said to myself. I saw her too late; *her hand and her heart are given.* But if I had seen her sooner, would she have preferred me? No, no, I render myself justice...what if love had not prevailed over merit...? A despairing idea. Oh, how different that year was from the first of my love, when I saw everything through a prism that embellished objects with the brightest colors! Sad, concentrated, devoured by desires, I was less innocent...I was unhappy...

On the present fifth of February...

Where are you, Hortense? You are living in the country. Content and happy, you are wandering under the shady trees of an enchanted park.

Let's go to the country...let me wander, like her, while I still can, under the bushy shade of those arbors ...which she renders charming!

Ah, I believe I can see her under the lindens, whose sweet perfume embalms the breath of the zephyrs.

Yes, let's go...

Alas, what am I thinking? I open the window; snow covers the roofs, and the trees are still leafless. Am I delirious?

Oh, Fontlhète, once happy, what has stolen all the wealth of life from you? What has deflected your reason? It's an unhappy amour! No more, no more joy. It's necessary to die...

Someone is knocking. A letter...from the Comtesse de Beauharnais

What have I just learned? You really are in the country, in the middle of winter, in the season of pleasures? What has distanced you from the capital? I breathed the same air as Hortense there; you no longer live there; I want to quit it.

The future fifth of February. I shall be less unhappy than today, for I shall no longer have a body. Are you reading me, Hortense? Adieu.

Response to Letter V

21 February.

Sweet charm of the interrogation of my beloved, how you have just resounded in my heart! You ask me where I am. You seek me, and not being able to find me, you imitate me. Oh, my love, did you love me then more than today? You would not willingly have been absent so long, but your absence is forced, and that is what consoles me. You cry to yourself: *Oh, Fontilhète, once happy, what has stolen all the wealth of life from you? What has deflected your reason?* Me, me, my love, who will render you a dear wife, and a son too, whom you will love with all your heart. A happy amour will render you all the wealth that an unhappy love had stolen from you...

But the end, O my love, the future fifth—which is today—*I shall be less unhappy than today, for I shall no longer have a body...what, no more body? Are you reading me, Hortense?* I am reading you, dear husband—be happy! But I am not; my happiness lacks you.

Letter VI

F.m.T. 6 February.

What a frightful night! A dream...a horrible dream had just shown me Hortense weeping, in despair, asking me for help, which I could not bring her!

“O you,” she said to me, “Who have offered me your heart, will you give me a shelter there against the misfortune that is pursuing me?”

I wanted to act, to get up, to fly to you...my exhausted strength did not permit it...my frozen tongue could not pronounce a word...

I awoke suffering. The seed of death is developing in my bosom. Oh, if it is combined with despair, its activity will be double...

Let us calm these mortal ideas. Let us recall what I was two years ago. It was the third day of our acquaintance. I awoke full of the idea of you. My heart was floating in a vague but delicious joy. An uncertain hope, but which the experience and example of others seemed to sustain, showed me Hortense, beautiful, adored, tender...

I remember that in getting up, I formed projects, which I thought easy of execution. Their foundations crumbled that same day. I had the good fortune to dine with you, at the home of a mutual friend, and the misfortune of losing a bold illusion. I was not afflicted by it; self-regard consoled me; other chimeras succeeded it; I was less audacious, and more tender...

A year ago...oh, I was no longer advantageous. I knew then that you had adorable principles, that you were a unique woman, that it was necessary to venerate you as Virtue itself. It was a year ago that, having gone to see an unfortunate family, of whom mention had been made to me the day before, I found them happy, consoled. I experienced a sensation of sadness and humiliation because someone had anticipated me. I made enquiries. It was you. My heart dilated, and in a surge of joy, I exclaimed: “Oh, what joy: I had the same thought as her! But she is better than me, and it is just that she should have the merit, of which I am less worthy!”

That moment was one of the happiest of my life.

I only found out today, from the good father of that family, that you were instructed that same evening of my competition, and that you were flattered by it. God! If only I had known sooner that you were flattered to have something in common with me! Yes, I believe that thought would have given me the strength to support life. Well, Hortense, it will soften the idea of death...

And in a year, when you read this letter, and you will see these three epochs in it, you will say: *From the first moment that Fontlhète saw me, he only breathed for me...*

Oh, in a year, where will I be? Where will the beautiful Hortense be? And what will she think of me then...?

P.S. I add to this letter, Madame, a postscriptum that my friend did not have time to write. You know how I have always been linked to Fontlhète. Thus, I know all his thoughts. What you mark in your latest response engages me to reply to you. Let the land at Meulant be sold, if you judge it appropriate and if you believe it to be advantageous. In consequence, your husband sends you a blank power of attorney, which you can have filled in by whoever you wish.

As for the five letters you have already received, you are right to regard them as an effervescence of the imagination. Although fundamentally true, they are only the proof of the disposition of your dear husband's agreeable intelligence. I warn you that you are not finished yet, and that the singular things that he has to write to you subsequently will provide even better evidence of the tranquil disposition in which you find him. I present to you the assurance of my respect, Madame.

President Delabrisse.

Response to Letter VI

22 February.

But my dear husband, your absence is very long and very painful. It is nearly six months since you left. Oh, my love, your letter is too tender! Oh, much too...for a cherished husband who is not coming back! I conserve our letters preciously. If our son sees them one day, he will know how much his father loved his mother, and how much his mother loved her dear Fontilhète.

I don't want him to be a magistrate. He will be a soldier, and bear the name Comte Hortense-de-Fontilhète—for I remember that what gave you so much chagrin was what I said to Madame de Marigny, that I loved that dear Comte. You mistook yourself for a rival! Oh, how could I love anyone other than you? You pleased me before my marriage, before having spoken to me. You were not a fop like your peers, and in spite of my repugnance for the judge's robe, and my taste for the title of Marquis, I would have preferred you to Monsieur de Chazu if you had asked for my hand.

Madame de Beauchamois sees your letters, as well as Madame de Marigny. You know how charming she is, the celestial Beauchamois! Her supple figure would give desire to Coldness itself. I shall tell you some of the naïve stories that she recounts to us sometimes, about her youth and the commencement of her marriage. I shall also talk to you about Madame de Marigny, to whom rather singular things have happened.

Your son is well. Maternal cares are the same, as if the Supreme Being were having you reborn, me knowing it, and I were your mother.

Until tomorrow, my love. For Adieu is a word that will never terminate one of the letters I write to you.

Entirely yours,
Your wife and your beloved,
Hortense de B.