

DUKE

3-Countess
Write to your inestimable husband and invite myself to dinner. Make myself presentable. Drink at least three bottles of his claret. After dinner, rush into Paris, and reconnoiter the battlefield.

COUNTESS

And, at some point, I presume, passionately plead your beloved's case?

DUKE

Yes – yes – of course – Hotel de Ville, she said, didn't she? That shouldn't be difficult. The night porter knows me by the jangle of my coins, and you've just presented me with a lovely purse. And then – our rendezvous – I break the news to her – she is grateful, warm, soft, pliant....

COUNTESS

I wish you luck.

DUKE

I'm delighted. Now I shall go and write to your worse half. Darling.

COUNTESS

Dearest.

Exit the Duke.

The Countess calls into the garden.

COUNTESS

Gabrielle, my friend!

Enter Gabrielle.

COUNTESS

I'm afraid I've done you a disservice, my dear.

GABRIELLE

I'm certain her highness is incapable of anything base.

COUNTESS

I wished so much to hear your sad tale without distractions that I have invited you into the garden. That prevented you from pleading your case with his excellency, the man who holds so much sway and could plead for you so powerfully! You should write to him!

GABRIELLE

Write?

COUNTESS

Yes. You should write to him and request an interview. In private.

GABRIELLE

His excellency, no doubt, is already aware my doors are always open for him.

COUNTESS

Yes, yes! Exactly those words! Write them!

GABRIELLE

In a letter?

COUNTESS

Yes, in a letter!

GABRIELLE

Takes out a letter.

Like this?

COUNTESS

Yes, like th... what?

GABRIELLE

I thought I should do so, and I've done so. But I wanted to inquire of you whether it is proper for me to address such a high figure as his excellency in such an intimate manner.

COUNTESS

I'm certain your motive is pure enough to protect you from any false assumptions. I'd be delighted to pass on your letter to the Duke.

Gabrielle gives the letter to Countess.

I just had another wonderful idea! You should stay here!

GABRIELLE

Here?

COUNTESS

Of course! You, in a hotel, alone, in a dangerous part of town, far from here, exposed to every kind of inconvenience!

GABRIELLE

But I cannot dare to inconvenience you!

COUNTESS

Nonsense. You'll have the guest room.

GABRIELLE

Could your highness only know how happy you're making me!

COUNTESS

It is decided. You will move here! Are your things with you?

GABRIELLE

Just my basket.

COUNTESS

Oh – yes – apples – I’ll send a groom to fetch your things from the hotel. You won’t even have to go there yourself!

GABRIELLE

What have I done to deserve such a kindness!

COUNTESS

When I have formed a plan, I like to leave nothing to chance. We’ll besiege Count de Bourbon together, and I’m certain he shall surrender!

GABRIELLE

I know not how to thank you!

COUNTESS

No need, my darling. A good deed is its own reward, or some such nonsense. Go now, find Mariette, tell her how you like your bed to be made.

Gabrielle tries to kiss her hand.

What are you doing? Come here.

Kisses Gabrielle on the forehead.

Run along.

Exit Gabrielle. The Countess reads the letter.

Oh, is there anything less prudent than gratitude? If one didn’t know you were a blushing innocent, my dear, one might imagine all possible sorts of naughty hints in here. Very good, for a beginner. Still, this needs to be shorter and blunter. You’re writing to a man. It only needs to be one degree more subtle than “Come ravage me.” Good thing I’m an old-fashioned lady and believe in sharing one thing with only my husband and no one else. That thing is, naturally, my handwriting. And, oh, look, I have a letter kit right here!

Sits down, writes a letter, chortling to herself. Hides the original. Hears footsteps. Races to the couch, stretches out in the attitude of extreme passivity.

Enter the Duke. The Countess stretches languidly.

I’ve got something special, just for you.

The Duke stands over her, looking down.