

II – Why Love is Dangerous

I assure you, Marquis, I shall keep my word, and on all occasions, I shall speak the truth, even though it be to my own detriment. I have more stability in my disposition than you imagine, and I fear exceedingly that the result of our intercourse may sometimes lead you to think that I carry this virtue into severity. But you must remember that I have only the external appearance of a woman, and that in mind and heart I am a man. Here is the method that I wish to follow with you. As I ask only to acquire information for myself before communicating to you my ideas, my intention is to propound them to the excellent man with whom we supped yesterday. It is true that he has none too good an opinion of poor humanity. He believes neither in virtue nor in spiritual things. But this inflexibility, mitigated by my indulgence for human frailties, will give you, I believe, the kind and the quantity of philosophy that is required in all intercourse with women. Let us come to the gist of your letter.

Since your entrance into the world it has offered you nothing, you say, of what you had imagined you would find there. Disgust and weariness follow you everywhere. You seek solitude, and as soon as you are enjoying it, it wears you. In a word, you do not know to what cause to attribute the restlessness that torments you. I am going to save you the trouble; I am, for my burden is to speak my thoughts on everything that may perplex you; and I do not know but you will often ask me questions as embarrassing for me to answer as they may have been for you to ask.

The uneasiness that you experience is caused only by the void in your heart. Your heart is without love, and it is trying to make you comprehend its wants. You have really what one calls the “need of loving.” Yes, Marquis, nature, in forming us, gave us an allowance of sentiments, which must expend themselves upon some object. Your age is the proper period for the agitations of love; as long as this sentiment

does not fill your heart, something will always be wanting; the restlessness of which you complain will never cease. In a word, love is the nourishment of the heart as food is of the body; to love is to fulfill the desire of nature, to satisfy a need. But if possible, manage it so that it will not become a passion. To protect you from this misfortune, I could almost be tempted to disprove the counsel given you, to prefer, to the company of women capable of inspiring esteem rather than love, the intercourse of those who pride themselves on being amusing rather than sedate and prim. At your age, being unable to think of entering into a serious engagement, it is not necessary to find a friend in a woman; one should seek to find only an amiable mistress.

The intercourse with women of lofty principles, or those whom the ravages of time force into putting themselves forward only by virtue of great qualities, is excellent for a man who, like themselves, is on life's decline. For you, these women would be too good company, if I dare so express myself. Riches are necessary to us only in proportion to our wants; and what you would better do, I think, is to frequent the society of those who combine, with agreeable figure, gentleness in conversation, cheerfulness in disposition, a taste for the pleasures of society, and strong enough not to be frightened by one affair of the heart.

In the eyes of a man of reason they appear too frivolous, you will say, but do you think they should be judged with so much severity? Be persuaded, Marquis, that if, unfortunately, they should acquire more firmness of character, they and you would lose much by it. You require in yeomen stability of character! Well, do you not find it in a friend? Shall I tell you what is in my mind? It is not our virtues you need, but our playfulness and our weakness. The love that you could feel for a woman, who would be estimable in every respect, would become too dangerous for you. Until you can contemplate a contract of marriage, you should seek only to

amuse yourself with those who are beautiful; a passing taste alone should attach you to one of them. Be careful not to plunge in too deep with her; there can nothing result but a bad ending. If you did not reflect more profoundly than the greater part of young people, I should talk to you in an entirely different tone, but I perceive that you are ready to give, to excess, a contrary meaning to their ridiculous frivolity. It is only necessary, then, to attach yourself to a woman who, like an agreeable child, might amuse you with pleasant follies, light caprices, and all those pretty faults, which make the charm of a gallant intercourse.

Do you wish me to tell you what makes love dangerous? It is the sublime view that one sometimes takes of it. But the exact truth is, it is only a blind instinct, which one must know how to appreciate, an appetite which you have for one object in preference to another, without being able to give the reason for your taste. Considered as a friendly intimacy when reason presides, it is not a passion, it is no longer love; it is, in truth, a warm hearted esteem, but tranquil, incapable of drawing you away from any fixed position. If, walking in the footsteps of our ancient heroes of romance, you aim at great sentiments, you will see that this pretended her-

oism makes of love only a sad and sometimes fatal folly. It is a veritable fanaticism, but if you disengage it from all that opinion makes it, it will soon be your happiness and pleasure. Believe me, if it were reason or enthusiasm which formed affairs of the heart, love would become insipid, or a frenzy. The only means of avoiding these two extremes is to follow the path I have indicated. You need only to be amused, and you will find amusement only among the women I mention to you as capable of it. Your heart wishes occupation – they are made to fill it. Try my recipe and you will find it good. I made you a fair promise, and it seems to me I am keeping my word with you exactly. Adieu, I have just received a charming letter from M. de Saint-Evremond, and I must answer it. I wish at the same time to propose to him the ideas that I have communicated to you, and I shall be very much mistaken if he does not approve of them.

Tomorrow I shall have the Abbé de Châteauneuf, and perhaps Molière. We shall read again the *Tartuffe*, in which some changes should be made. Take notice, Marquis, that those who do not conform to all I have just told you, have a little of the qualities of that character.