

IX – Love is a Natural Inclination

So you have taken what I said about love in my last letter as a crime? I have blasphemed love? I have degraded it by calling it a “necessity?” You have such noble thoughts, Marquis. What is passing in your mind is proof of it. You cannot realize, or imagine anything less than the pure and delicate sentiments that fill your heart. To see the Countess, hold sweet discourse with her, listen to the sound of her gentle voice, dance attendance upon her, that is the height of your desires, it is your supreme happiness. Far from you are those vulgar sentiments, which I unworthily substitute for your sublime metaphysics, sentiments created for worldly souls occupied solely with sensual pleasures. What a mistake I made, that I could I imagine that the Countess was a woman to be captured by motives so little worthy of her? To raise the suspicion in her mind that you possessed such views, would it not inevitably expose you to her hate, her scorn, etc.?

Are not these the inconveniences that my morality leads you to apprehend? My poor Marquis! You are yourself deceived by your misunderstanding of the real cause of your sentiments. Give me all your attention: I wish to draw you away from error, but in a manner that will best accord with the importance of what I am about to say. I mount the tribune; I feel the presence of the god who inspires me. I rub my forehead with the air of a person who meditates on profound truths, and who is going to utter great thoughts. I am going to reason according to rule.

Men, I know not by what caprice, have attached shame to the indulgence of that reciprocal inclination which nature has bestowed upon both sexes. They knew, however, that they could not entirely stifle its voice, so what did they do to relieve themselves of their embarrassment? They attempted to substitute the mere shell of an affection wholly spiritual, for the humiliating necessity of appearing in good faith to satisfy a natural want. Insensibly, they

have grown accustomed to meddle with a thousand little sublime nothings connected with it, and as if that were not enough, they have at last succeeded in establishing the belief that all these frivolous accessories, the work of a heated imagination, constitute the essence of the inclination. There you are – love erected into a fine virtue. At least they have given it the appearance of a virtue. But let us break through this prestige and cite an example.

At the beginning of their intercourse, lovers fancy themselves inspired by the noblest and most delicate sentiments. They exhaust their ingenuity, exaggerations, the enthusiasm of the most exquisite metaphysics; they are intoxicated for a time with the idea that their love is a superior article. But let us follow them in their liaison: Nature quickly recovers her rights and re-assumes her sway; soon, vanity, gorged with the display of an exaggerated purpose, leaves the heart at liberty to feel and express its sentiments without restraint, and dissatisfied with the pleasures of love, the day comes when these people are very much surprised to find themselves, after having traveled around a long circuit, at the very point where a peasant, acting according to nature, would have begun. And thereby hangs a tale.

A certain Honesta, to give her a fictitious name, in whose presence I was one day upholding the theory I have just been maintaining, became furious.

“What!” she exclaimed in a transport of indignation, “do you pretend, Madame, that a virtuous person, one who possesses only honest intentions, such as marriage, is actuated by such vulgar motives? You would believe, in that case, that I, for instance, who ‘par vertu,’ have been married three times, and who, to subdue my husbands, have never wished to have a separate apartment, that I only acted thus to procure what you call pleasure? Truly you would be very much mistaken. Indeed, never have I refused to fulfill the duties of my state, but I

assure you that the greater part of the time, I yielded to them only through complaisance, or as a distraction, always with regret at the importunities of men. We love men and marry them because they have certain qualities of mind and heart; and no woman, with the exception of those, perhaps, whom I do not care to name, even attaches any importance to other advantages -”

I interrupted her, and more through malice than good taste, carried the argument to its logical conclusion. I made her see that what she said was a new proof of my contention:

“The reasons you draw from the legitimate views of marriage,” said I, “prove that those who hold them, fend to the same end as two ordinary lovers, perhaps, even in better faith, with this difference only: that they wish an extra ceremony attached to it.”

This shot roused the indignation of my adversary.

“You join impiety to libertinage,” said she, moving away from me.

I took the liberty of making some investigations, and would you believe it, Marquis? This prude so refined, had such frequent ‘distractions’ with her three husbands, who were all young and vigorous, that she buried them in a very short time.

Come now, Marquis, retract your error; abandon your chimera, reserve delicacy of sentiment for friendship; accept love for what it is. The more dignity you give it, the more dangerous you make it; the more sublime the idea you form of it, the less correct it is. Believe de la Rochefoucauld, a man who knows the human heart well, “If you expect to love a woman for love of herself,” says he, “you will be much mistaken.”