

*LIII – Old Age Not a Preventive Against Attack*

Oh, I shall certainly abandon your interests, if you persist in talking to me in such fashion. What demon inspired you with the idea of taking the place of the absent? Could any one tease another as you did me last evening? I do not know how you began it, but however much I desired to be angry with you, it was impossible for me to do so. I do not know how this will end. What is certain, however, is it will be useless for you to go on, for I have decided not to love you, and what is worse, I shall never love you – yes, sir, never.

Eh? truly, but this is a strange thing – to attempt to persuade a woman that she is afflicted, that she needs consolation, when she assures you that it is not the fact, and that she wants for nothing. This is driving things with a tight hand. I entreat you, reflect a little on the folly that has seized upon you. Would it be decent, tell me that, if I were to take the place of my friend? That a woman who has served you as a Mentor, who has played the rôle of mother to you, should aspire to that of lover? Unprincipled wretch that you are! If you so promptly abandon a young and lovely woman, what would you do with an old girl like me? Perhaps you wish to attempt my conquest to see whether love is for me the same in practice as in theory. Do not go to the trouble of attempting such a seduction, I will satisfy your curiosity on that point immediately.

You know that whatever we are, women seldom follow any given principles. Well, that is what you would discover in any gallant association you aspire to form with me. All I have said about women and love has not given you any information as to my line of conduct on such an occasion. There is a vast difference between feeling and thinking, between talking for one's own account and pleading the cause of another.

You would, therefore, find in me many singularities that might strike you unfavorably. I do not feel as other women. You might know them all without knowing Ninon; and believe me, the novelties you would discover would not compensate you for the trouble you might take to please me.

It is useless to exaggerate the value you put upon my conquest, that I tell you plainly; you are expending too much on hope, I am not able to respond. Remain where you are in a brilliant career. The court offers you a thousand beautiful women, with whom you do not risk, as you would with me, becoming weary of philosophy, of too much intelligence.

I do not disguise the fact, however, that I would have been glad to see you today. My head was split all the afternoon over a dispute on the ancients and moderns. I am still out of humor on the subject, and feel tempted to agree with you that I am not so far along on the decline of life as to confine myself to science, and especially to the gentlemen of antiquity.

If you could only restrain yourself and pay me fewer compliments, it is not to be doubted that I would prefer to have you come and enliven my serious occupations, rather than any one else. But you are such an unmanageable man, so wicked, that I am afraid to invite you to come and sup with me tomorrow. I am mistaken, for it is now two hours after midnight, and I recollect that my letter will not be handed you before noon. So it is today I shall expect you. Have you any fault to find? It is a formal rendezvous, to be sure, but let the fearlessness in appointing it be a proof that I am not very much afraid of you, and that I shall believe in as much of your soft talk as I deem proper. You understand that it will not be I who can be imposed upon by that. I know men so well -