

LIV – A Shrewd But Not an Unusual Scheme

This is not the time, Marquis, to hide from you the true sentiments of the Countess in your regard. However much I have been able to keep her secret without betraying her friendship, and I have always done so, if I conceal from you what I am going to communicate, you may one day justly reproach me.

Whatever infidelities you may have been guilty of, whatever care I have been able to take to persuade her that you have been entirely forgotten, she has never ceased to love you tenderly. Although she has sought to punish you by an assumed indifference, she has never thought of depriving herself of the pleasure of seeing you, and it has been through the complaisance of the Countess that I have sometimes worried you; it was to goad you into visiting me more frequently. But all these schemes have not been able to satisfy a heart so deeply wounded, and she is on the point of executing a design I have all along been opposed to. You will learn all about it by reading the letter she wrote me yesterday, and which I enclose in this.

FROM THE COUNTESS
TO MADEMOISELLE DE L'ENCLOS

“If you wish to remain my friend, my dear Ninon, cease to combat my resolution; you know it is not the inspiration of the moment. It is not the fruit of a momentary mortification, an imprudent vexation, nor despair. I have never concealed it from you. The possession of the heart of the Marquis de Sévigné might have been my supreme felicity, if I could have flattered myself with having it forever. I was certain of losing it if I had granted him the favors he exacted of me. His inconstancy has taught me that a different conduct would not be a sure means of retaining a lover. I must renounce love forever, since men are incapable of having a liaison with a woman, as tender but as pure, as that of simple friendship.

“You, yourself, well know that I am not sufficiently cured to see the Marquis without always suffering. Flight is the only remedy for my malady, and that is what I am about to take. I do not fear, moreover, what the world may say about my withdrawal to the country. I have cautioned those who might be surprised. It is known that I have won in a considerable action against the heirs of my late husband. I have given out that I am going to take possession of the estate awarded me. I will thus deprive the public of the satisfaction of misinterpreting my taste for solitude, and the Marquis of all suspicion that he is in any manner to blame for it. I enclose his letters and his portrait.

“Good Heaven! How weak I am! Why should it cost my heart so much to get rid of an evil so fatal to my repose? But it is done, and my determination cannot be shaken. Pity me, however, and remember, my dear friend, the promise you gave me to make him understand that I have for him the most profound indifference. Whoever breaks off relations with a lover in too public a manner, suggests resentment and regret at being forced to do so; it is an honest way of saying that one would ask nothing better than to be appeased. As I have no desire to resume my relations with the Marquis, return him what I send, but in the manner agreed upon, and pray him to make a similar restitution. You may tell him that the management of my property obliges me to leave Paris for a time, but do not speak of me first.

“I should be inconsolable at leaving you, my dear Ninon, if I did not hope that you would visit me in my solitude. You write willingly to your friends, if you judge them by the tenderness and esteem they have for you. In that case, you have none more worthy of that title than I. I rely, therefore, upon your letters until you come to share my retreat. You know my sentiments for you.”

I have no advice to give you, Marquis, on what you have just read, the sole favor I expect

from you is never to compromise me for the indiscretion I commit, and that the Countess shall never have any reason for not forgiving me. All I can say to justify myself in my own eyes is, that you have loved the Countess too much for

her resolution to be a matter of absolute indifference to you. Had I been just, I would have betrayed both by leaving you in ignorance of her design.