

X – The Sensation of Love Forms a Large Part of a Woman's Nature

The commentaries the Countess has been making you about her virtue, and the refinement she expects in a lover, have certainly alarmed you. You think she will always be as severe as she now appears to you. All I have told you does not reassure you. You even esteem it a favor to me that you stop with doubting my principles. If you dared you would condemn them entirely. When you talk to me in that fashion, I feel at liberty to say that I believe you. It is not your fault if you do not see clearly into your own affair, but in proportion as you advance, the cloud will disappear, and you will perceive with surprise the truth of what I have been telling you.

The more cold blooded you are, or at least, as long as passion has not yet reached that degree of boldness its progress will ultimately lead you to, the mere hope of the smallest favor is a crime; you tremble at the most innocent caress. At first you ask for nothing, or for so slight a favor, that a woman conscientiously believes herself obliged to grant it, delighted with you on account of your modesty. To obtain this slight favor, you protest never to ask another, and yet, even while making your protestations, you are preparing to exact more. She becomes accustomed to it and permits further trifling, which seems to be of so little importance that she would endure it from any other man, if she were on the slightest terms of intimacy with him. But, to judge from the result, what appears to be of so little consequence on one day when compared with the favor obtained the day before, becomes very considerable when compared with that obtained on the first day. A woman, reassured by your discretion, does not perceive that her frailties are being graduated upon a certain scale. She is so much mistress of herself, and the little things that are at first exacted, appear to her to be so much within her power of refusal, that she expects to possess the same strength when something of a graver character is proposed to her. It is just this way:

she flatters herself that her power of resistance will increase in the same proportion with the importance of the favors she will be called upon to grant. She relies so entirely upon her virtue, that she challenges danger by courting it. She experiments with her power of resistance; she wishes to see how far the granting of a few unimportant favors can lead her. Here is where she is imprudent, for by her very rashness she accustoms her imagination to contemplate suggestions that are the final cause of her seduction. She travels a long way on the road without perceiving that she has moved a single step. If upon looking back along the route, she is surprised at having yielded so much, her lover will be no less surprised at having obtained so much.

But I go still further. I am persuaded that love is not always necessary to bring about the downfall of a woman. I knew a woman, who, although amiable in her manner with everybody, had never been suspected of any affair of the heart. Fifteen years of married life had not diminished her tenderness for her husband, and their happy union could be cited as an example to imitate.

One day at her country place, her friends amused themselves so late that they were constrained to remain at her house all night. In the morning, her servants happening to be occupied with her guests, she was alone in her apartment engaged in making her toilet. A man whom she knew quite well, but who was without social position, dropped in for a short visit and to pass the compliments of the day. Some perplexity in her toilette induced him to offer his services. The negligee dress she wore, naturally gave him an opportunity to compliment her upon her undiminished charms. Of course she protested, but laughingly, claiming they were unmerited. However, one thing followed another, they became a trifle sentimental, a few familiarities which they did not at first deem of any consequence, developed into something more decided, until, finally, unable to resist,

they were both overcome, the woman being culpable, for she regarded his advances in the nature of a joke and let them run on. What was their embarrassment after such a slip? They have never since been able to understand how they could have ventured so far without having had the slightest intention of so doing.

I am tempted to exclaim here: Oh, you mortals who place too much reliance upon your virtue, tremble at this example! Whatever may be your strength, there are, unfortunately, moments when the most virtuous is the most feeble. The reason for this strange phenomenon is, that nature is always on the watch, always aiming to attain her ends. The desire for love is, in a woman, a large part of her nature. Her virtue is nothing but a piece of patchwork.

The homilies of your estimable Countess may be actually sincere, although in such cases, a woman always exaggerates, but she deludes herself if she expects to maintain to the end, sentiments so severe and so delicate. Fix this fact well in your mind, Marquis, that these female metaphysicians are not different in their nature from other women. Their exterior is more imposing, their morals more austere, but inquire into their acts, and you will discover

that their heart affairs always finish the same as those of women less refined. They are a species of the “overnice,” forming a class of their own, as I told Queen Christine of Sweden, one day, “They are the Jansenists of love.” (Puritans.)

You should be on your guard, Marquis, against everything women have to say on the chapter of gallantry. All the fine systems, of which they make such a pompous display, are nothing but vain illusions, which they utilize to astonish those who are easily deceived. In the eyes of a clear-sighted man, all this rubbish of stilted phrases is but a parade at which he mocks, and which does not prevent him from penetrating their real sentiments. The evil they speak of love, the resistance they oppose to it, the little taste they pretend for its pleasures, the measures they take against it, the fear they have of it – all that springs from love itself. Their very manner renders it homage, indicates that they harbor the thought of it. Love assumes a thousand different forms in their minds. Like pride, it lives and flourishes upon its own defeat; it is never overthrown that it does not spring up again with renewed force.

What a letter, good heavens! To justify its length would be to lengthen it still more.