

*XIV – Worth and Merit Are Not Considered in Love*

No, Marquis, the curiosity of Madame de Sévigné has not offended me. On the contrary, I am very glad that she wished to see the letters you receive from me. Without doubt, she thought that if it were a question of gallantry, it could only be to my profit; she now knows the contrary. She will also know that I am not so frivolous as she imagined, and I believe her just enough to form hereafter another idea of Ninon than the one she has heretofore had of her, for I am not ignorant of the fact that she does not speak of me much to my advantage. But her injustice will never influence my friendship for you. I am philosophic enough to console myself for not securing the commendation of people who judge me without knowing me. Whatever may happen, I shall continue to talk to you with my ordinary frankness, and I am sure that Madame de Sévigné, in spite of her refined mind, will, at heart, be more of my opinion than she cares to show. Now, I come to what relates to you.

Well, Marquis, after infinite care and trouble, you think you have at last softened that stony heart? I am glad of it, but I laugh at your interpretation of the Countess' sentiments. You share with all men a common error, which it is necessary to remove, however flattering it may be to you to foster it. You believe, every one of you, that it is your worth alone that kindles passion in the heart of women, and that qualities of heart and mind are the causes of the love they feel toward you. What a mistake! You only think so, it is true, because your pride finds satisfaction in the thought. But, if you can do so without prejudice, inquire into the motives that actuate you, and you will soon perceive that you are laboring under a delusion, and that we deceive you; that, everything well considered, you are the dupe of your vanity and of ours; that the worth of the person loved is only an excuse which gives an occasion for love, and is not the real cause. Finally, that all this sublime byplay, which is paraded on both sides, is a mere pre-

liminary which enters into the desire to satisfy the need I first indicated to you as the prime exciting cause of this passion. I tell you this is a hard and humiliating truth, but it is nonetheless certain. We women enter the world with this necessity of loving undefined, and if we take one man in preference to another, let us say so honestly, we yield less to the knowledge of merit than to a mechanical instinct which is nearly always blind.

For proof of this I need only refer to the foolish passions with which we sometimes become intoxicated for strangers, or at least for men with whom we are not sufficiently acquainted, to relieve our selection of them from the odium of imprudence from the beginning, in which case if there is a mutual response, well, it is pure chance. We are always forming attachments without sufficient circumspection, hence I am not wrong in comparing love to an appetite which one sometimes feels for one kind of food rather than for another, without being able to give the reason. I am very cruel to thus dissipate the phantoms of your self-love, but I am telling you the truth. You are flattered by the love of a woman, because you believe it implies the worthiness of the object loved. You do her too much honor – let us say rather, that you have too good an opinion of yourself. Understand that it is not for yourself that we love you, to speak with sincerity, it is our own happiness we seek. Caprice, interest, vanity, disposition, the uneasiness that affects our hearts when they are unoccupied, these are the sources of the great sentiment we wish to deify! It is not great qualities that affect us; if they enter for anything into the reasons which determine us in your favor, it is not the heart which receives the impression, it is vanity; and the greater part of the things in you which please us, very often makes you ridiculous or contemptible.

But, what will you have? We need an admirer who can entertain us, with ideas of our perfections; we need an obliging person

who will submit to our caprices – we need a man! Chance presents us with one rather than another; we accept him, but we do not choose him. In a word, you believe yourselves to be the objects of our disinterested affection. I repeat: You think women love you for yourselves. Poor dupes! You are only the instruments of their pleasures, the sport of their caprices. I must, however, do women justice. It is not that you are what I have just enumerated with their consent, for the sentiments which I develop here are not well defined in their minds, on the contrary,

with the best faith in the world, women imagine themselves influenced and actuated only by the grand ideas which your vanity and theirs has nourished. It would be a crying injustice to accuse them of deceit in this respect, but, without being aware of it, they deceive themselves, and you are equally deceived.

You see that I am revealing the secrets of the good goddess. Judge of my friendship, since, at the expense of my own sex, I labor to enlighten you. The better you know women, the fewer follies they will lead you to commit.