

*XLII – Surface Indications in Women are Not Always Guides*

What, I censure you, Marquis? I will take good care not to do so, I assure you. You have not been willing to follow my advice, and hence, I am not at all sorry for having ill-used you. You thought you had nothing to do, but to treat the Countess roughly. Her easy fashion of treating love, her accessibility, her indulgence for your numerous faults, the freedom with which she mocks the Platonicians, all this encouraged you to hope that she was not very severe, but you have just discovered your mistake. All this outward show was nothing but deceitful and perfidious allurements. To take advantage thus of the good faith of any one – I must confess that it is a conduct which cries for vengeance. She deserves all the names you give her.

But do you wish me to talk to you with my customary frankness? You have fallen into an error that is common among men. They judge women from the surface. They imagine that a woman whose virtue is not always on the qui vive, will be easier to overcome than a prude; even experience does not undeceive them. How often are they exposed to a severity all the keener that it was unexpected? Their custom then, is to accuse women of caprice and oddity; all of you use the same language, and say, “Why such equivocal conduct?” When a woman has decided to remain, intractable, why surprise the credulity of a lover? Why not possess an exterior conformable to her sentiments? In a word, why permit a man to love her, when she does not care ever to see him again? Is this not being odd and false? Is it not trifling with sentiment?

You are in error, gentlemen, you are imposing upon your vanity; it is in vain you try to put us on a false scent, that, of itself, is offensive, and you talk of sentiment as ennobling a thing that resembles it very little. Are not you, yourselves, to blame if we treat you thus? However little intelligence a woman may have, she knows that the strongest tie to bind you to her is anticipation, wherefore, you must let her lay the blame

on you. If she were to arm herself from the first with a severity that would indicate that she is invincible, from that time, no lovers for her. What a solitude would be hers, what shame even? For a woman of the most pronounced virtue is no less sensible of the desire to please – she makes her glory consist in securing homage and adoration. But without ignoring the fact that those she expects attention from are induced to bestow them only for reasons that wound her pride, unable to reform this defect, the only part she can take is to use it to her advantage to keep them by her side; she knows how to keep them, and not destroy the very hopes which, however, she is determined never to gratify. With care and skill she succeeds. Hence, as soon as a woman understands her real interests she does not fail to say to herself what the Countess confessed to me at our last interview:

“I can well appreciate the ‘I love you’ of the men; I do not disguise the fact that I know what it signifies at bottom, therefore upon me rests the burden of being offended at hearing them; but when women have penetrated their motives, they have need of their vanity to disconcert their designs. Our anger, when they have offended us, is not the best weapon to use in opposing them. Whoever must go outside herself and become angry to resist them, exposes her weakness. A fine irony, a piquant raillery, a humiliating coolness, these are what discourage them. Never a quarrel with them, consequently no reconciliation. What advantages does not this mode of procedure take from them!

“The prude, it is true, follows a quite different method. If she is exposed to the least danger, she does not imagine herself to be reasonable but in proportion to the resentment she experiences; but upon whom does such conduct impose? Every man who knows the cards says to himself, ‘I am ill used because the opportunity is unfavorable. It is my awkwardness that

is punished and not my temerity. Another time, that will be well received which is a crime today; this severity is a notice to redouble my effort, to merit more indulgence and disarm pride; she wishes to be appeased.’ And the only means in such case to make her forget; the offense is, that in making an apology to repeat it a second time. With my recipe, I am certain that a man will never reason that way.

“The Marquis, for example, has sometimes permitted me to read in his eyes his respectful intentions. I never knew but one way to punish him; I have feigned not to understand him; insensibly, I have diverted his mind to other objects. And this recipe has worked well up to the moment I last saw him at my house. There was no way to dissimulate with him; he wished to honor me with some familiarities, and I stopped him immediately, but not in anger. I deemed it more prudent to arm myself with reason than with anger. I appeared to be more afflicted than irritated, and I am sure my grief touched his heart more than bitter reproaches, which might have alarmed him. He went away very much dissatisfied; and just see what the heart is – at first, I was afraid I had driven him away forever, I was tempted to reproach

myself for my cruelty, but, upon reflection, I felt reassured. Has severity ever produced inconstancy?”

To go on: We talked until we were out of breath, and everything the Countess told me gave me to understand that she had made up her mind. It will be in vain for you to cry out against her injustice, consider her as odd and inhuman; she will not accept any of the sweetness of love unless it costs her pride nothing, and I observe that she is following that resolution with more firmness than I imagined her capable of. The loss of your heart would undoubtedly be a misfortune for which she could never be consoled. But, on the other hand, the conditions you place upon your perseverance appear too hard to be accepted; she is willing to compromise with you. She hopes to be able to hold you without betraying her duty, a project worthy of her courage, and I hope it will succeed better than the plan she had formed to guarantee her heart against love. Let us await the outcome.

Shall we see you tomorrow at Madame la Presidente’s? If you should desire to have an occasion to speak to her, I do not doubt that you will make your peace.