

XLIV – Why Love Grows Weak – Marshal de Saint-Evremond's Opinion

A calm has succeeded the storm, Marquis, and I see by your letter that you are more satisfied with the Countess and with yourself. How powerful logic is, coming from the mouth of a woman we adore! You see how the conduct of our friend has produced an opposite effect from that of the Marquise; the severity of the former increasing your esteem and love for her, and the kindness of the Marquise making an unfaithful lover out of the Chevalier. So it generally happens among men – ingratitude is commonly the price of benefits. This misfortune, however, is not always beyond the reach of remedies, and in this connection I wish to give you the contents of a letter I received from Monsieur de Saint-Evremond a few days ago. You are not ignorant of the intimate relations that have always existed between us.

The young Count de --- had just espoused Mademoiselle ---, of whom he was passionately amorous. He complained one day to me that hymen and the possession of the beloved object weakened every day, and often destroyed the most tender love. We discussed the subject for a long time, and as I happened to write to Saint-Evremond that day, I submitted the question to him. This is his reply:

SAINT-EVREMOND
TO MADMOISELLE DE L'ENCLOS

My opinion is exactly in line with yours, Mademoiselle; it is not always, as some think, hymen or the possession of the loved object which, of itself, destroys love; the true source of the dissatisfaction that follows love is in the unintelligent manner of economizing the sentiments, a possession too easy, complete, and prolonged.

When we have yielded to the transports of a passion without reserve, the tremendous shock to the soul cannot fail quickly to leave it in a profound solitude. The heart finds itself in a void, which alarms and chills it. We vainly

seek outside of ourselves, the cause of the calm, which follows our fits of passion; we do not perceive that an equal and more enduring happiness would have been the fruit of moderation. Make an exact analysis of what takes place within you when you desire anything. You will find that your desires are nothing but curiosity, and this curiosity, which is one of the forces of the heart, when satisfied, our desires vanish. Whoever, therefore, would hold a spouse or a lover, should leave him something to be desired, something new should be expected every day for the morrow. Diversify his pleasures, procure for him the charm of variety in the same object, and I will vouch for his perseverance in fidelity.

I confess, however, that hymen, or what you call your “defeat,” is, in an ordinary woman, the grave of love. But then it is less upon the lover that the blame falls, than upon her who complains of the cooling of the passion; she casts upon the depravity of the heart what is due to her own un-skillfulness, and her lack of economy. She has expended in a single day everything that might keep alive the inclination she had excited. She has nothing more to offer to the curiosity of her lover; she becomes always the same statue – no variety to be hoped for, and her lover knows it well.

But in the woman I have in mind, it is the aurora of a lovelier day – it is the beginning of the most satisfying pleasures. I understand by effusions of the heart, those mutual confidences, those ingenuities, those unexpected avowals, and those transports, which excite in us the certainty of creating an absolute happiness, and meriting all the esteem of the person we love. That day is, in a word, the epoch when a man of refinement discovers inexhaustible treasures which have always been hidden from him – the freedom a woman acquires who brings into play all the sentiments which constraint has held in reserve; her heart takes a lofty flight, but one well under control. Time, far from lead-

ing to loathing, will furnish new reasons for a greater love. But, to repeat: I assume sufficient intelligence in her to be able to control her inclination. For to hold a lover, it is not enough (perhaps it is too much) to love passionately; she must love with prudence, with restraint, and modesty is for that reason the most ingenious virtue refined persons have ever imagined. To yield to the impetuosity of an inclination, to be annihilated, so to speak, in the object loved, is the method of a woman without discernment. That is not love, it is a liking for a moment; it is to transform a lover into a spoiled child. I would have a woman behave with more reserve and economy. An excess of ardor is not justifiable in my opinion, the heart being always an impetuous charger, which must be steadily curbed. If you do not use your strength with economy, your vivacity will be nothing but a passing transport. The same indifference you perceive in a lover, after those convulsive emotions, you, yourself, will experience, and soon, both of you will feel the necessity of separating.

To sum up: there is more intelligence required to love than is generally supposed, and to be happy in loving. Up to the moment of the fatal "yes," or if you prefer, up to the time of her defeat, a woman does not need artifice to hold her lover. Curiosity excites him, desire sustains him, and hope encourages him. But once he reaches the summit of his desires, it is for the woman to take as much care to retain him, as he exhibited in overcoming her; the desire to keep him should render her fertile in expedients – the heart is similar to a high position, easier to obtain than to keep. Charms are sufficient to make a man amorous; to render him constant, something more is necessary – skill is required, a little management, a great deal of intelligence, and even a touch of ill humor and fickleness. Unfortunately, however, as soon as women have yielded, they become too tender, too complaisant. It would be better for the common good, if they were to resist less in the beginning, and more afterward. I maintain that they never can forestall loathing, without leaving the heart

something to wish for, and the time to consider.

I hear them continually complaining that our indifference is always the fruit of their complaisance for us. They are ever recalling the time when, goaded by love and sentiment, we spent whole days by their side. How blind they are! They do not perceive that it is still in their power to bring us back to an allegiance, the memory of which is so dear. If they forget what they have already done for us, they will not be tempted to do more, but if they make us forget, then we shall become more exacting. Let them awaken our hearts by opposing new difficulties, arousing our anxieties, in fine, forcing us to desire new proofs of an inclination, the certainty of which diminishes its value in our estimation. They will then find less cause of complaint in us, and will be better satisfied with themselves.

Shall I frankly avow it? Things would indeed change, if women would remember at the right time that their rôle is always that of the party to be entreated, ours that of him who begs for new favors; that, created to grant, they should never offer. Reserved, even in an excess of passion, they should guard against surrendering at discretion; the lover should always have something to ask, and consequently, he would be always submissive so as to obtain it. Favors without limit degrade the most seductive charms, and are, in the end, revolting even to him who exacts them. Society puts all women on the same level – the handsome and the ugly, after their defeat, are indistinguishable except from their art to maintain their authority. But what commonly happens? A woman imagines she has nothing further to do than to be affectionate, caressing, sweet, of even temper and faithful. She is right in one sense, for these qualities should be the foundation of her character – they will not fail to draw esteem – but these qualities, however estimable they may be, if they are not offset by a shade of contrariety, will not fail to extinguish love, and bring on languor and weariness, mortal poisons for the best constituted heart.

Do you know why lovers become nauseated so easily when enjoying prosperity? Why they are so little pleased after having had so much pleasure? It is because both parties interested have an identically erroneous opinion. One imagines there is nothing more to obtain, the other fancies she has nothing more to give. It follows as a necessary consequence that one slackens in his pursuit, and the other neglects to be worthy of further advances, or thinks she becomes so by the practice of solid qualities. Reason is substituted for love, and henceforward, no more seasoning in their relations, no more of those trifling quarrels so necessary to prevent dissatisfaction by forestalling it.

But when I exact, that evenness of temper should be animated by occasional storms, do not be under the impression that I pretend lovers should always be quarreling to preserve their happiness. I only desire to impress it upon you, that all their misunderstandings should emanate from love itself; that the woman should not forget (by a species of pusillanimous kindness) the respect and attentions due her; that by an excessive sensitiveness, she does not convert her love into a source of anxiety capable of poisoning every moment of her existence; that by a scrupulous fidelity, she may not render her lover too sure that he has nothing to fear on that score.

Neither should a woman by a sweetness, an unalterable evenness of temper, be weak enough to pardon everything lacking in her lover. Experience demonstrates that women too often sacrifice the hearts of their spouses or their lovers by too many indulgences and facilities. What recklessness! They martyrize themselves by sacri-

ficing everything; they spoil them and convert them into ungrateful lovers. So much generosity finally turns against themselves, and they soon become accustomed to demand as a right what is granted them as a favor.

You see women every day (even among those we despise with so much reason), who reign with a scepter of iron, treat as slaves men who are attached to them, debase them by force of controlling them. Well, these are the women who are loved longer than the others. I am persuaded that a woman of refinement, well brought up, would never think of following such an example. That military manner is repugnant to gentleness and morals, and lacks that decency which constitutes the charm in things even remote from virtue. But let the reasonable woman soften the clouds a trifle, there will always remain precisely what is necessary to hold a lover.

We are slaves, whom too much kindness often renders insolent; we often demand to be treated like those of the new world. But we have in the bottom of our hearts a comprehension of justice, which tells us that the governing hand bears down upon us sometimes for very good reasons, and we take kindly to it.

Now, for my last word: In everything relating to the force and energy of love, women should be the sovereigns; it is from them we hope for happiness, and they will never fail to grant us that as soon as they can govern our hearts with intelligence, moderate their own inclinations, and maintain their own authority, without compromising it and without abusing it.