

XV – The Hidden Motives of Love

Really, Marquis, I do not understand how you can meekly submit to the serious language I sometimes write you. It seems as if I had no other aim in my letters than to sweep away your agreeable illusions and substitute mortifying truths. I must, however, get rid of my mania for saying deeply considered things. I know better than any one else that pleasant lies are more agreeable than the most reasonable conversation, but my disposition breaks through everything in spite of me. I feel a fit of philosophy upon me again today, and I must ask you to prepare to endure the broadside of morality I am making ready to give you. Hereafter, I promise you more gayety. So now, to answer your letter:

No, I will not take back anything. You may make war on me as much as it please you, because of the bad opinion of my sex I expressed in my last letter. Is it my fault, if I am furnished with disagreeable truths to utter? Besides, do you not know, Marquis, that the being on Earth who thinks the most evil of women, is a woman?

I wish, however, very seriously, to justify the ideas, to my manner of expressing which you have taken an exception. I am neither envious nor unjust. Because I happened to mention my own sex rather than yours, you must not imagine that it is my intention to underrate women. I hoped to make you understand that, without being more culpable than men, they are more dangerous because they are accustomed more successfully to hide their sentiments. In effect, you will confess the object of your love sooner than they will acknowledge theirs. However, when they assure you that their affection for you has no other source than a knowledge of your merit and of your good qualities, I am persuaded that they are sincere. I do not even doubt that when they realize that their style of thought is becoming less refined, they do everything in their power to hide the fact from themselves. But the motives, about which I have been

telling you, are in the bottom of their hearts just the same. They are none the less the true causes of the liking they have for you, and whatever efforts they may make to persuade themselves that the causes are wholly spiritual, their desire changes nothing in the nature of things. They hide this deformity with as much care as they would conceal teeth that might disfigure an otherwise perfect face. In such case, even when alone they would be afraid to open their mouth, and so, by force of habit in hiding this defect from others as well as from themselves, they succeed in forgetting all about it or in considering that it is not much of a defect.

I agree with you that you would lose too much if men and women were to show themselves in their true colors. The world has agreed to play a comedy, and to show real, natural sentiments would not be acting, it would be substituting the real character for the one it has been agreed to feign. Let us then enjoy the enchantment without seeking to know the cause of the charm that amuses and seduces us. To anatomize love would be to enter upon its cure. Psyche lost it for having been too curious, and I am tempted to believe that this fable is a lesson for those who wish to analyze pleasure.

I wish to make some corrections in what I have said to you: If I told you that men are wrong in priding themselves on their choice of a woman, and their sentiments for her; if I said that the motives which actuate them are nothing less than glorious for the men, I desire to add, that they are equally deceived if they imagine that the sentiments which they show with so much pompous display are always created by force of female charms, or by an abiding impression of their merits. How often does it happen that those men who make advances with such a respectful air, who display such delicate and refined sentiments, so flattering to vanity, who, in a word, seem to breathe only through them, only for them, and have no other desire than their happiness, how often, I repeat, are those

men, who adorn themselves with such beautiful sentiments, influenced by reasons entirely the contrary? Study, penetrate these good souls, and you will see in the heart of this one, instead of a love so disinterested, only desire; in that one, it will be only a scheme to share your fortune, the glory of having obtained a woman of your rank; in a third you will discover motives still more humiliating to you – he will use you to rouse the jealousy of some woman he really loves, and he will cultivate your friendship merely to distinguish himself in her eyes by rejecting you. I cannot tell you how many motives, there are so many. The human heart is an insolvable enigma. It is a whimsical combination of all the known contrarities. We think we know its workings; we see their effects;

we ignore the cause. If it expresses its sentiments sincerely, even that sincerity is not reassuring. Perhaps its movements spring from causes entirely contrary to those we imagine we feel to be the real ones. But, after all, people have adopted the best plan, that is, to explain everything to their advantage, and to compensate themselves in imagination for their real miseries, and accustom themselves, as I think I have already said, to deifying all their sentiments. Inasmuch as everybody finds in that the summit of his vanity, nobody has ever thought of reforming the custom, or of examining it to see whether it is a mistake.

Adieu; if you desire to come this evening you will find me with those whose gayety will compensate you for this serious discourse.