

*XVII - Women Understand the Difference Between Real Love and Flirtation*

Perhaps, Marquis, you will think me still more cruel than the Countess. She is the cause of your anxieties, it is true, but I am the cause of something worse – I feel a great desire to laugh at them. Oh, I enter into your troubles seriously enough, I cannot do more, and your embarrassment appears great to me. Really, why risk a declaration of love to a woman who takes a wicked pleasure in avoiding it on every occasion? Now, she appears affected, and then again, she is the most unmindful woman in the world in spite of all you do to please her. She listens willingly and replies gaily to the gallant speeches and bold conversation of a certain Chevalier, a professional coxcomb, but to you she speaks seriously and with a preoccupied air. If you take on a tender and affectionate tone, she replies flippantly, or perhaps changes the subject. All this intimidates you, troubles you, and drives you to despair. Poor Marquis. I, and I answer you that all this is love, true and beautiful. The absence of mind, which she affects with you, the nonchalance she puts on for a mask, ought to make you feel at heart that she is far from being indifferent. But your lack of boldness, the consequences which she feels must follow such a passion as yours, the interest which she already takes in your condition, all this intimidates, the countess herself, and it is you who raise obstacles in her path. A little more boldness on your part would put you both at your ease. Do you remember what M. de la Rochefoucauld told you lately, “A reasonable man in love may act like a madman, but he should not and cannot act like an idiot.”

Besides, when you compare your respect and esteem with the free and almost indecent manner of the Chevalier, when you draw from it the conclusion that she should prefer you to him, you do not know how incorrectly you argue. The Chevalier is nothing but a gallant, and what he says is not worth considering, or at least appears so. Frivolity alone, the habit of romancing to all the pretty women he finds in

his way, makes him talk. Love counts for nothing, or at least for very little, in all his liaisons. Like the butterfly, he hovers only a moment over each flower. An amusing episode is his only object. So much frivolity is not capable of alarming a woman. She is delighted at the trifling danger she incurs in listening to such a man. The Countess knows very well how to appreciate the discourse of the Chevalier; and to say everything in a word, she knows him to be a man whose heart is worn out. Women, who, to hear them talk, go in more for metaphysics, know admirably how to tell the difference between a lover of his class and a man like you. But you will always be more formidable, and more to be dreaded by your manner of making yourself felt.

You boast to me of your respectful esteem, but I reply that it is nothing of the kind, and the Countess knows it well. Nothing ends with so little respect as a passion like yours. Quite different from the Chevalier, you require recognition, preference, acknowledgment, and even sacrifices. The Countess sees all these pretensions at a glance, or at least, if in the cloud which still envelops them, she does not distinguish them clearly, nature gives her a presentiment of what the cost will be if she allows you the least opportunity to instruct her in a passion which she doubtless already shares. Women rarely inquire into the reasons which impel them to give themselves up or to resist; they do not even amuse themselves by trying to understand or explain them, but they have feelings, and sentiment with them is correct, it takes the place of intelligence and reflection. It is a sort of instinct, which warns them in case of danger, and which leads them aright perhaps as surely as does the most enlightened reason. Your beautiful Adelaide wishes to enjoy an incognito as long as she can. This plan is very congenial to her real interests, and yet I am fully persuaded that it is not the work of reflection. She sees it only from the point of view

of a passion, outwardly constrained, making stronger impressions and still greater progress inwardly. Let it have an opportunity to take deep root, and give to this fire she tries to hide, time to consume the heart in which you wish to confine it.

You must also admit, Marquis, that you deceive yourself in two ways in your calculation. You thought you respected the Countess more than the Chevalier does; on the contrary you see that the gallant speeches of the Chevalier are without effect, while you begrudge them to the heart of your beauty. On the other hand, you figure that her preoccupied air, and indifferent and inattentive manner, are proofs or forewarnings of your unhappiness. Undeceive yourself. There is no more certain proof of a passion than the efforts made to hide it. In a word, when the Countess treats you kindly, whatever proofs you may give her of your affection, when she sees you without alarm on the point of confessing your love, I tell you that her heart is caught; she loves you, on my word.

By the way, I forgot to reply to that part of your letter concerning myself. Yes, Marquis, I constantly follow the method that I prescribed at the commencement of our correspondence. There are few matters in my letters that I have not used as subjects of conversation in my social reunions. I rarely suggest ideas of any importance to you, without having taken the opinions of my friends on their verity. Sometimes it is Monsieur de la Bruyère, sometimes Monsieur de Saint-Evremond whom I consult; another time it will be Monsieur l'Abbé de Châteauneuf. You must admire my good faith, Marquis, for I might claim the credit of the good I write you, but I frankly avow that you owe it only to the people whom I receive at my house.

Apropos of men of distinguished merit, M. de la Rochefoucauld has just sent me word that he would like to call on me. I fixed tomorrow, and you might do well to be present, but do not forget how much he loves you. Adieu.