

*XXI – The Comedy of Contrariness*

**P**robity in love, Marquis? How can you think of such a thing? Ah, you are like a drowned man. I shall take good care not to show your letter to any one, it would dishonor you. You do not know how to undertake the maneuvers I have advised you to make, you say? Your candor, your high sentiments made your fortune formerly. Well, love was then treated like an affair of honor, but nowadays, the corruption of the age has changed all that; love is now nothing more than a play of the humor and of vanity.

Your inexperience still leaves your virtues in an inflexible condition that will inevitably cause your ruin, if you have not enough intelligence to bring them into accord with the morals of the times. One cannot now wear his sentiments on his sleeve. Everything is show; payment is made in airs, demonstrations, and signs. Everybody is playing a comedy, and men have had excellent reasons for keeping up the farce. They have discovered the fact that nobody can gain anything by telling the actual truth about women. There is a general agreement to sub-

stitute for this sincerity a collection of contrary phrases. And this custom has proved contagious in cases of gallantry.

In spite of your high principles, you will agree with me, that unless that custom, called "politeness," is not pushed so far as irony or treason, it is a sociable virtue to follow, and of all the relations among men, the true meaning of gallantry has more need of being concealed than that of any other social affair. How many occasions do you not find where a lover gains more by dissimulating the excess of his passion, than another who pretends to have more than he really has?

I think I understand the Countess; she is more skillful than you. I am certain she dissimulates her affection for you with greater care than you take to multiply proofs of yours for her. I repeat; the less you expose yourself, the better you will be treated. Let her worry in her turn; inspire her with the fear that she will lose you, and see her come around. It is the surest way of finding out the true position you occupy in her heart. Adieu.