

*XXIII – Two Irreconcilable Passions in Women*

Will you pardon me, Marquis, for laughing at your afflictions? You take things too much to heart. Some imprudences, you say, have drawn upon you the anger of the Countess, and your anxiety is extreme. You kissed her hand with an ecstasy that attracted the attention of everybody present. She publicly reprimanded you for your indiscretion, and your marked preference for her, always offensive to other women, has exposed, you to the railleries of the Marquise, her sister-in-law. Dear me, these are without contradiction terrible calamities! What, are you simple enough to believe that you are lost beyond salvation because of an outward manifestation of anger, and you do not even suspect that inwardly you are justified? You impose upon me the burden of convincing you of the fact, and in doing so I am forced to reveal some strange mysteries concerning women. But, I do not intend, in writing you, to be always apologizing for my sex. I owe you frankness, however, and having promised it, I acquit myself of the promise.

A woman is always balancing between two irreconcilable passions, which continually agitate her mind: the desire to please, and the fear of dishonor. You can judge of our embarrassment. On the one hand, we are consumed with the desire to have an audience to notice the effect of our charms. Ever engaged in schemes to bring us into notoriety; ravished whenever we are fortunate enough to humiliate other women, we would make the whole world witness of the preferences we encounter, and the homage bestowed upon us. Do you know the measure of our satisfaction in such cases? The despair of our rivals, the indiscretions that betray the sentiments we inspire, this enchants us pro-

portionately to the misery they suffer. Similar imprudences persuade us much more that we are loved, than that our charms are incapable of giving us a reputation.

But what bitterness poisons such sweet pleasures. Beside so many advantages marches the malignity of rival competitors, and sometimes your disdain. A fatality that is mournful. The world makes no distinction between women who permit you to love them, and those whom you compensate for so doing. Uninfluenced, and sober-minded, a reasonable woman always prefers a good reputation to celebrity. Put her beside her rivals who contest with her the prize for beauty, and though she may lose that reputation of which she appears so jealous, though she compromise herself a thousand times, nothing is equal in her opinion to see herself preferred to others. By and by, she will recompense you by preferences; she will at first fancy that she grants them out of gratitude, but they will be proofs of her attachment. In her fear of appearing ungrateful, she becomes tender.

Can you not draw from this that it is not your indiscretions that vex us? If they wound us, we must pay tribute to appearances, and you would be the first to censure an excessive indulgence.

See that you do not misunderstand us. Not to vex us on such occasions would be really to offend. We recommend you to practice discretion and prudence, that is the rôle we enact, is it not? Is it necessary for me to tell you the part you are to play? I am often reminded that accepting the letter of the law is to fail to understand it. You may be sure that you will be in accord with our intentions as soon as you are able to interpret them properly.