

*XXIX – The Misfortune of Too Sudden an Avowal*

I think as you do, Marquis, the Countess punishes you too severely for having surprised an avowal of her love. Is it your fault if her secret escaped? She has gone too far to retreat. A woman can experience a return to reason, but to go so far as to refuse to see you for three days, give out that she has gone into the country for a month, return your tender letters without opening them, is, in my opinion, a veritable caprice of virtue. After all, however, do not despair whatever may happen. If she were really indifferent she would be less severe.

Do not make any mistake about this: There are occasions when a woman is less out of humor with you, than with herself. She feels with vexation, that her weakness is ready to betray her at any moment. She punishes you for it, and she punishes herself by being unkind to you. But you may be sure that one day of such caprice, advances the progress of a lover more than a year of care and assiduity. A woman soon begins to regret her unkindness; she deems herself unjust; she desires to repair her fault, and she becomes benevolent.

What surprises me the most is the marked passage in your letter which states that since the Countess has appeared to love you, her character has totally changed. I have no particular information on that point. All I know is, that she made her debut in society as a lady of elegance, and her debut was all the more marked because, during the life of her husband, her conduct was entirely the contrary. Do you not remember when you first made her acquaintance, that she was lively even to giddiness, heedless, bold, even coquettish, and appeared to be incapable of a reasonable attachment? However, today, you tell me, she has become a serious melancholic, pre-occupied, timid, affected; sentiment has taken the place of mincing airs; at least she appears to so fit in with the character she assumes today, that you imagine it to be her true one, and her former one, borrowed. All my philosophy would be at fault in such a case,

if I did not recognize in this metamorphosis the effects of love. I am very much mistaken if the storm raging around you today, does not end in the most complete victory, and one all the more assured because she has done everything in her power to prevent it. But if you steadily pursue your object, carrying your pursuit even as far as importunity, follow her wherever she goes and where you can see her; if you take it upon yourself not to allude to your passion, and treat her with all the mannerism of an attentive follower, respectful, but impressed, what will happen? She will be unable to refuse you the courtesies due any indifferent acquaintance. Women possess an inexhaustible fund of kindness for those who love them. You know this well, you men, and it is what always reassures you when you are treated unkindly. You know that your presence, your attentions, the sorrow that affects you, have their effect, and end by disarming our pride.

You are persuaded that those whom our virtue keeps at a distance through pride, are precisely those whom it fears the most, and unfortunately, your guess is only too just; it keeps them off, indeed, because it is not sure of its ability to resist them. It does more sometimes – it goes to the length of braving an enemy whose attack it dares not anticipate. In a word, the courage of a reasonable woman is nearly always equal to a first effort, but rarely is that effort lasting. The very excess of its violence is the cause of its weakening. The soul has only one degree of force, and exhausted by the constraint that effort cost it, it abandons, itself to lassitude. By and by, the knowledge of its weakness throws it into discouragement. A woman of that disposition bears the first shock of a redoubtable enemy with courage, but the danger better understood, she fears a second attack. A woman, persuaded that she has done everything possible to defend herself against an inclination which is urging her on, satisfied with the combats in which she has been engaged, finally reaches the opinion

that her resistance cannot prevail against the power of love. If she still resist, it is not by her own strength; she derives no help except from the idea of the intrepidity she at first displayed to him who attacks, or from the timidity she inspired in him in the beginning of her resistance. Thus it is, that however reasonable she may be, she nearly always starts out with a fine defense, she only needs pride to resolve upon that; but unfortunately, you divine the means of overcoming her, you persevere in your attacks, she is not indefatigable, and you have so little delicacy that, provided you obtain her heart, it is of no consequence to you whether you have obtained it through your importunities or with her consent.

Besides that, Marquis, the excess of precautions a woman takes against you, is strong evidence of how much you are feared. If you were an object of indifference, would a woman take the trouble to avoid you? I declare to you that she would not honor you by being afraid of you. But I know how unreasonable lovers are. Always ingenious in tormenting themselves, the habit of never having but one object in view is so powerful, that they prefer being pestered with one that is disagreeable than with none at all.

However, I feel sorry for you. Smitten as you are, your situation cannot fail to be a sad one. The poor Marquis, how badly he is treated!