

XXV – Why Virtue Is So Often Overcome

My last letter has apparently scandalized you, Marquis. You insist that it is not impossible to find virtuous women in our age of the world. Well, have I ever said anything to the contrary? Comparing women to besieged castles, have I ever advanced the idea that there were some that had not been taken? How could I have said such a thing? There are some that have never been besieged, so you perceive that I am of your opinion. I will explain, however, so that there will be no more chicanery about the question.

Here is my profession of faith in this matter: I firmly believe that there are good women who have never been attacked, or who have been wrongly attacked.

I further firmly believe that there are good women who have been attacked, and well attacked, when they have had neither disposition, violent passions, liberty, nor a hated husband.

I have a mind at this point to put you in possession of a rather lively conversation on this particular point, while I was still very young, with a prude, whom an adventure of some brilliancy unmasked. I was inexperienced then, and I was in the habit of judging others with that severity which every one is disposed to manifest until some personal fault has made us more indulgent toward our neighbors. I had considered it proper to blame the conduct of this woman without mercy. She heard of it. I sometimes saw her at an aunt's, and made preparations to attack her morals. Before I had an opportunity she took the matter into her own hands, by taking me aside one day, and compelled me to submit to the following harangue, which I confess made a deep impression in my memory:

"It is not for the purpose of reproaching you for the talk you have been making on my account, that I wish to converse with you in the absence of witnesses," she explained, "it is to

give you some advice, the truth and solidity of which you will one day appreciate.

"You have seen fit to censure my conduct with a severity, you have actually treated me with a disdain, which tells me how proud you are of the fact that you have never been taken advantage of. You believe in your own virtue, and that it will never abandon you. This is a pure illusion of your amour propre, my dear child, and I feel impelled to enlighten your inexperience, and to make you understand, that far from being sure of that virtue which renders you so severe, you are not even sure that you have any at all. This prologue astonishes you, eh? Well, listen with attention, and you will soon be convinced of the truth whereof I speak.

"Up to the present time, nobody has ever spoken to you of love. Your mirror alone has told you that you are beautiful. Your heart, I can see by the appearance of indifference that envelops you like a mantle, has not yet been developed. As long as you remain as you are, as long as you can be kept in sight as you are, I will be your guarantee. But when your heart has spoken, when your enchanting eyes shall have received life and expression from sentiment, when they shall speak the language of love, when an internal unrest shall agitate your breast, when, in fine, desire, half stifled by the scruples of a good education, shall have made you blush more than once in secret, then your sensibility, through the combats by which you will attempt to vanquish it, will diminish your severity toward others, and their faults will appear more excusable.

"The knowledge of your weakness will no longer permit you to regard your virtue as infallible. Your astonishment will carry you still farther. The little help it will be to you against too-impetuous inclinations, will make you doubt whether you ever had any virtue. Can you say a man is brave before he has ever fought? It is the same with us. The attacks made upon us are alone the parents of our virtue,

as danger gives birth to valor. As long as one has not been in the presence of the enemy, it is impossible to say whether he is to be feared, and what degree of resistance it will be necessary to bear against him.

"Hence to justify a woman in flattering herself that she is essentially virtuous and good by force of her own strength, she must be in a position where no danger, however great it may be, no motive no matter how pressing, no pretext whatever, shall be powerful enough to triumph over her. She must meet with the most favorable opportunities, the most tender love, the certainty of secrecy, the esteem and the most perfect confidence in him who attacks her. In a word, all these circumstances combined should not be able to make an impression upon her courage, so that to know whether a woman be virtuous in the true meaning of the word, one must imagine her as having escaped unscathed all these united dangers, for it would not be virtue, but only resistance where there should be love without the disposition, or disposition without the occasion. Her virtue would always be uncertain, as long as she had never been attacked by all the weapons that might vanquish her. One might always say of her: if she had been possessed of a different constitution, she might not have resisted love; or, if a favorable occasion had presented itself, her virtue would have played the fool."

"According to this," said I, "it would be impossible to find a single virtuous woman, for no one has ever had so many enemies to combat."

"That may be," she replied, "but do you know the reason? Because it is not necessary to have so many to overcome us, one alone is sufficient to obtain the victory."

But I stuck to my proposition, "You pretend then that our virtue does not depend upon ourselves, since you make it the puppet of occasion, and of other causes foreign to our own will?"

"There is no doubt about it," she answered. "Answer me this: Can you give yourself a lively or sedate disposition? Are you free to defend yourself against a violent passion? Does it

depend upon you to arrange all the circumstances of your life, so that you will never find yourself alone with a lover who adores you, who knows his advantages and how to profit by them? Does it depend upon you to prevent his pleadings, I assume them to be innocent at first, from making upon your senses the impression they must necessarily make? Certainly not; to insist upon such an anomaly would be to deny that the magnet is master of the needle. And you pretend that your virtue is your own work, that you can personally claim the glory of an advantage that is liable to be taken from you at any moment? Virtue in women, like all the other blessings we enjoy, is a gift from Heaven; it is a favor, which Heaven may refuse to grant us. Reflect then how unreasonable you are in glorifying in your virtue; consider your injustice when you so cruelly abuse those who have had the misfortune to be born with an ungovernable inclination toward love, whom a sudden violent passion has surprised, or who have found themselves in the midst of circumstances out of which you would not have emerged with any greater glory.

"Shall I give you another proof of the justice of my ideas? I will take it from your own conduct. Are you not dominated by that deep persuasion, that every woman who wishes to preserve her virtue need never allow herself to be caught, that she must watch over the smallest trifles, because they lead to things of greater importance? It is much easier for you to take from men the desire to make an attack upon your virtue by assuming a severe exterior, than to defend against their attacks. The proof of this is in the fact that we give young girls in their education as little liberty as is possible in order to restrain them. We do more – a prudent mother does not rely upon her fear of dishonor, nor upon the bad opinion she has of men; she keeps her daughter out of sight; she puts it out of her power to succumb to temptation. What is the excuse for so many precautions? Because, the mother fears the frailty of her pupil, if she is exposed for an instant to danger.

“In spite of all these obstacles with which she is curbed, how often does it not happen that love overcomes them all? A girl well trained, or better, well guarded, laughs at her virtue, because she imagines it is all her own, whereas, it is generally a slave rigorously chained down, who thinks everybody is satisfied with him as long as he does not run away. Let us inquire further into this: In what class do you find abandoned females? In that where they have not sufficient wealth or happiness constantly to provide themselves with the obstacles which have saved you; in that, where men have attacked their virtue with more audacity, more facility, more frequency, and more impunity, and consequently with more advantages of every sort; in that, where the impressions of education, of example, of pride, the desire of a satisfactory establishment could not sustain them. Two doors below, there is a woman whom you hate and despise. And in spite of the outside aid that sustains that virtue, of which you are so

proud, in two days you might be more despicable than she, because you will have had greater helps to guarantee you against misfortune. I am not seeking to deprive you of the merit of your virtue, nor am I endeavoring to prevent you from attaching too much importance to it; by convincing you of its fragility, I wish to obtain from you only a trifle of indulgence for those whom a too impetuous inclination, or the misfortunes of circumstances have precipitated into a position so humiliating in their own eyes; my sole object is to make you understand that you ought to glorify yourself less in the possession of an advantage which you do not owe to yourself, and of which you may be deprived tomorrow.”

She was going to continue, but some one interrupted us. Soon afterward, I learned by my own experience, that I should not have had so good an opinion of many virtues that had been formerly imposed upon me, beginning with my own.