

*XXVI – Love Demands Freedom of Action*

I have been of the same opinion as you, Marquis, although the ideas I communicated to you yesterday appeared to be true speculatively, that it would be dangerous if all women were to be guided by them. It is not by a knowledge of their frailty, that women will remain virtuous, but by the conviction that they are free and mistresses of themselves when it comes to yield or to resist. Is it by persuading a soldier that he will be vanquished, that he is goaded into fighting with courage? Did you not notice that the woman who did the talking, as I have related in my last letter, had a personal interest in maintaining her system? It is true, that when we examine her reasoning according to the rules of philosophy, it does seem to be a trifle specious, but it is to be feared that in permitting ourselves to reason in that fashion on what virtue is, we may succeed in converting into a problem, the rules we should receive and observe as a law, which it is a crime to construe. Moreover, to persuade women that it is not to themselves they are indebted for the virtue they possess, might it not deprive them of the most powerful motive to induce them to preserve it? I mean by that, the persuasion that it is their own work they defend. The consequences of such morality would be discouraging, and tend to diminish, in the eyes of a guilty woman, the importance of her errors. But let us turn to matters of more interest to you.

At last, after so many uncertainties, after so many revolutions in your imagination, you are sure you are loved? You have finally succeeded in exciting the Countess to divulge her secret during a moment of tenderness. The words you burned to hear have been pronounced. More, she has allowed to escape her, a thousand involuntary proofs of the passion you have inspired. Far from diminishing your love, the certainty

that you are beloved in return has increased it; in a word, you are the happiest of men. If you knew with how much pleasure I share your happiness, you would be still happier. The first sacrifice she desired to make was to refuse to receive the Chevalier; you were opposed to her making it, and you were quite right. It would have compromised the Countess for nothing, which calls to my mind the fact, that women generally lose more by imprudence than by actual faults. The confidence you so nobly manifested in her, ought to have greatly impressed her.

Everything is now as it should be. However, shall I tell you something? The way this matter has turned out alarms me. We agreed, if you remember, that we were to treat the subject of love without gloves. You were not to have, at the most, but a light and fleeting taste of it, and not a regulated passion. Now I perceive that things become more serious every day. You are beginning to treat love with a dignity that worries me. The knowledge of true merits, solid qualities, and good character is creeping into the motives of your liaison, and combining with the personal charms that render you so blindly amorous. I do not like to have so much esteem mixed with an affair of pure gallantry. It leaves no freedom of action; it is work instead of amusement. I was afraid in the beginning that your relations would assume a grave and measured turn. But perhaps you will only too soon have new pretensions, and the Countess by new disputes will doubtless re-animate your liaison. Too constant a peace is productive of a deadly ennui. Uniformity kills love, for as soon as the spirit of method mingles in an affair of the heart, the passion disappears, languor supervenes, weariness begins to wear, and disgust ends the chapter.