

## *XXVIII – Mere Beauty Is Often of Trifling Importance*

You are not mistaken, Marquis; the taste and talent of the Countess for the clavecin (piano) will tend to increase your love and happiness. I have always said that women do not fully realize the advantages they might draw from their talents; indeed, there is not a moment when they are not of supreme utility, most women always calculating on the presence of a beloved object as they only thing to be feared. In such case they have two enemies to combat – their love and their lover. But when the lover departs, love remains; and although the progress it makes in solitude is not so rapid, it is no less dangerous. It is then that the execution of a sonata, the sketching of a flower, the reading of a good book, will distract the attention from a too seductive remembrance, and fix the mind on something useful. All occupations that employ the mind are so many thefts from love.

Suppose his inclination brings a lover to our knees, what can he accomplish with a woman who is only tender and pretty? With what can he employ his time if he does not find in her society something agreeable, some variety? Love is an active sentiment, it is a consuming fire always demanding additional fuel, and if it can find only sensible objects upon which to feed, it will keep to that diet; I mean to say, that when the mind is not occupied the senses find something to do.

There are too many gesticulations while talking; sometimes I think we shall be compelled to use sign language with a person we know to be unable to understand a more refined language. It is not in resisting advances, nor in taking offense at too bold a caress, that a woman is enabled to maintain her virtue. When she is attacked in that fashion, even while defending herself, her senses are excited and the very agitation that impels her to resist, hastens her defeat. But it is by distracting the attention of the man to other objects, that the woman is relieved of the necessity of resisting his advances, or taking offense at his liberties to which she herself has

opened the way, for there is one thing certain, which is, that a man will never disappoint a woman who is anxious for him.

You will not find a single woman, unless you can suppose one absolutely ignorant, who is not able to gauge exactly the degree of familiarity she ought to permit. Those who complain that their lovers do not come up to the mark do not affect me in the least. Inquire into the reason, and you will perceive that their stupidities, their imprudences are the cause. It was their desire, to be found wanting.

Defect in culture may expose us to the same inconveniences, for with a woman without mind, and without talents, what else is there to do but undertake her conquest? When in her company, the only way to kill time is to annoy her. There is nothing to talk about but her beauty, and of the impression she has made upon the senses, and sensual language is the only one that can be employed for that purpose. She herself is not convinced that you love her, and she does not respond; she does not recompense you but by the assistance of the senses, and exhibits an agitation equal to yours, or else, her decency gone, she has nothing but bad humor with which to oppose you. This is the last ditch of a woman without mind, and what a culmination! On the contrary, what are not the advantages of an intelligent, resourceful woman? A lively repartee, piquant raillery, a quarrel seasoned with a trifle of malice, a happy citation, a graceful recitation, are not these so many distractions for her, and the time thus employed, is it not so much gained for virtue?

The great misfortune with women is, without doubt, the inability to find occupations worthy of their attention, and this is the reason why love with them is a more violent passion than with men; but they have a characteristic which, properly directed may serve as an antidote. All women, to say the least, are as vain as they are sensitive, whence, the cure for sensitiveness is vanity. While a woman is occupied

in pleasing in other ways than by the beauty of her figure, she loses sight of the sentiment that inspires her to act. In truth, this sentiment will not cease to be the “determining motive” (you must permit me to use some technical term of art), but it will not be the actual object presented to her attention, and that is something gained. Wholly devoted to the care of becoming perfect in the species of glory to which she aspires, this same desire, of which love will be the source, will turn against love, by dividing the attention of the mind and the affections of the heart; in a word it will create a diversion.

But perhaps you will tell me that there are women of spirit and talents beyond the reach of attack. Whence you infer that men who do not dislike freedom will avoid them, but that fools and men of intelligence cultivate them. That is true, but the fools take to them because they do not perceive the difficulty in their way, and men of intelligence do not avoid them, because they aspire to surmount it.

Now, ought not you, who are a military man, to appreciate everything I say to you about talent? I will suppose a campaign upon which you have entered: you have been given charge of conducting the siege of a city. Would you be satisfied if the governor, persuaded that the city is impregnable, should open to you the gates without having given you the least occasion to distinguish yourself? I venture to say not; he should resist, and the more he seeks to cover himself with glory, the more glory he gives you. Well, Marquis, in love as in war, the pleasure of obtaining a victory is measured according to the obstacles in the way of it. Shall I say it? I am tempted to push the parallel farther. See what it is to take a first step. The true glory of a woman consists less, perhaps, in yielding, than in putting in a good defense, so that she will merit the honors of war.

I shall go still farther. Let a woman become feeble enough to be at the point of yielding, what is left her to retain a satisfactory lover, if her intelligence and talents do not come to her aid? I am well aware that they do not give themselves these advantages, but if we investi-

gate the matter, we shall find that there are very few women who may not acquire a few accomplishments if they really set about it; the difference would only be the more, at least. But women are generally born too indolent to be able to make such an effort. They have discovered that there is nothing so convenient as being pretty. This manner of pleasing does not require any labor; they would be glad not to have any other. Blind that they are, they do not see that beauty and talents equally attract the attention of men, but beauty merely exposes her who possesses it, whereas talents furnish her with the means of defending it.

In a word, to appreciate it at its full value, beauty stores up regrets and a mortal weariness for the day when it shall cease to exist. Would you know the reason? It is because it drowns out all other resources. As long as beauty lasts, a woman is regarded as something, she is celebrated, a crowd sighs at her feet. She flatters herself that this will go on forever. What a desolate solitude when age comes to ravish her of the only merit she possesses? I would like, therefore (my expression is not elevated, but it interprets my thought), I would like that in a woman, beauty could be a sign of other advantages.

Let us agree, Marquis, that in love, the mind is made more use of than the heart. A liaison of the heart is a drama in which the acts are the shortest and the between acts the longest; with what then, would you fill the interludes if not with accomplishments? Possession puts every woman on the same level, and exposes all of them equally to infidelity. The elegant and the beautiful, when they are nothing else, have not, in that respect, any advantage over her who is plain – the mind, in that case making all the difference. That alone can bestow upon the same person the variety necessary to prevent satiety. Moreover, it is only accomplishments that can fill the vacuum of a passion that has been satisfied, and we can always have them in any situation we may imagine, either to postpone defeat and render it more flattering, or to assure us of our conquests. Lovers themselves profit by them. How many things they cherish although

they set their faces against them? Wherefore, let the Countess, while cultivating her decided talent for the clavecin, understand her interests and yours.

I have read over my letter, my dear Marquis, and I tremble lest you find it a trifle serious. You

see what happens when one is in bad company. I supped last night with M. de la Rochefoucauld, and I never see him that he does not spoil me in this fashion, at least for three or four days.