

### XXXI – *The Opinion and Advice of Monsieur de la Sablière*

How many things I have to tell you, Marquis! I was preparing to keep my word with you, and had arranged to use strategy upon the Countess to worm her secret from her, when chance came to my aid.

You are not ignorant of her confidence in Monsieur de la Sablière. She was with him just now in an arbor of the garden, and I was passing through a bushy path intending to join them, when the mention of your name arrested my steps. I was not noticed, and heard all the conversation, which I hasten to communicate to you word for word.

“I have not been able to conceal from your penetration my inclination for M. de Sévigné,” said the Countess, “and you cannot reconcile the serious nature of so decided a passion with the frivolity attributed to me in society. You will be still more astonished when I tell you that my exterior character is not my true one, that the seriousness you notice in me now, is a return to my former disposition; I was never giddy except through design. Perhaps you may have imagined that women can only conceal their faults, but they sometimes go much farther, sir, and I am an instance. They even disguise their virtues, and since the word has escaped me, I am tempted, at the risk of wearying you, to explain by what strange gradation I reached that point.

“During my married life, I lived retired from the world. You knew the Count and his taste for solitude. When I became a widow, there was the question of returning to society, and my embarrassment as to how I was to present myself was not small. I interrogated my own heart; in vain I sought to hide it from my own knowledge. I had a strong taste for the pleasures of society, but at the same time I was determined to add to it purity of morals. But how to reconcile all this? It seemed to me a difficult task to establish a system of conduct, which, without compromising me, would not at

the same time deprive me of the pleasures of life.

“This is the way I reasoned: Destined to live among men, formed to please them, and to share in their happiness, we are obliged to suffer from their caprices, and above all fear their malignity. It seems that they have no other object in our education than that of fitting us for love; indeed, it is the only passion permitted us, and by a strange and cruel contrariety, they have left us only one glory to obtain, which is that of gaining a victory over the very inclination imposed upon us. I therefore endeavored to ascertain the best means of reconciling in use and custom, two such glaring extremes, and I found predicaments on all sides.

“We are, I said to myself, simple enough when we enter society, to imagine that the greatest happiness of a woman should be to love and be loved. We then are under the impression that love is based on esteem, upheld by the knowledge of amiable qualities, purified by delicacy of sentiment, divested of all the insipidities which disfigure it – in a word, fostered by confidence and the effusions of the heart. But unfortunately, a sentiment so flattering for a woman without experience, is everything less than that in practice. She is always disabused when too late.

“I was so good in the beginning as to be scandalized at two imperfections I perceived in men, their inconstancy and their untruthfulness. The reflections I made on the first of these defects, led me to the opinion that they were more unfortunate than guilty. From the manner in which the human heart is constituted, is it possible for it to be occupied with only one object? No, but does the treachery of men deserve the same indulgence? Most men attack a woman’s virtue in cold blood, in the design to use her for their amusement, to sacrifice her to their vanity, to fill a void in an idle life, or to acquire a sort of reputation based upon the loss of ours. There are a large number

of men in this class. How to distinguish true lovers? They all look alike on the surface, and the man who pretends to be amorous, is often more seductive than one who really is.

“We are, moreover, dupes enough to make love a capital affair. You men, on the contrary, consider it merely a play; we rarely surrender to it without an inclination for the person of the lover; you are coarse enough to yield to it without taste. Constancy with us is a duty; you give way to the slightest distaste without scruple. You are scarcely decent in leaving a mistress, the possession of whom, six months before, was your glory and happiness. She may consider herself well off if she is not punished by the most cruel indiscretions.

“Hence I regarded things from their tragical side, and said to myself, ‘If love draws with it so many misfortunes, a woman who cherishes her peace of mind and reputation, should never love.’ However, everything tells me that we have a heart, that this heart is made for love, and that love is involuntary. Why, then, venture to destroy an inclination that is part of our being? Would it not be wiser to rectify it? Let us see how it will be possible to succeed in such an enterprise.

“What is a dangerous love? I have observed that kind of love. It is a love which occupies the whole soul to the exclusion of every other sentiment, and which impels us to sacrifice everything to the object loved.

“What characters are susceptible of such a sentiment? They are the most solid, those who show little on the outside, those who unite reason with an elevated nobility of character in their fashion of thinking.

“Finally, who are the men the most reasonable for women of that kind? It is those who possess just sufficient brilliant qualities to fix a value on their essential merit. It must be confessed, though, that such men are not good companions for women who think. It is true, they are rare at present, and there has never been a period so favorable as this to guarantee us against great passions, but misfortune will have it that we meet one of them in the crowd.

“The moralists pretend that every woman possesses a fund of sensibility destined to be applied to some object or another. A sensible woman is not affected by the thousand trifling advantages so agreeable to men in ordinary women. When she meets an object worthy of her attention, it is quite natural that she should estimate the value of it; her affection is measured according to her lights, she cannot go half way. It is these characters that should not be imitated, and all acquaintance with the men of whom I have just been speaking, should be avoided if a woman values her peace of mind. Let us create a character, which can procure for us two advantages at one and the same time – one to guard us from immoderate impressions; the other to ward off men who cause them. Let us give them an outside that will at least prevent them from displaying qualities they do not possess. Let us force them to please us by their frivolity, by their absurdities. However much they may practice affectation, their visible faults would furnish us with weapons against them. What happy state can a woman occupy to procure such safeguards? It is undoubtedly that of a professional society woman.

“You are doubtless astonished at the strange conclusion to which my serious reasoning has led me. You will be still more astonished when you shall have heard the logic I employ to prove that I am right: listen to the end. I know the justice of your mind, and I am not lacking in it, however frivolous I may appear to be, and you will finish by being of my opinion.

“Do you believe that the outward appearance of virtue guarantees the heart against the assaults of love? – A poor resource. When a woman descends to a weakness, is not her humiliation proportionately as great as the esteem she hoped to secure? The brighter her virtue, the easier mark for malice.

“What is the world’s idea of a virtuous woman? Are not men so unjust as to believe that the wisest woman is she who best conceals her weakness, or who, by a forced retreat puts herself beyond the possibility of having any? Rather than accord us a single perfection, they

carry wickedness to the point of attributing to us a perpetual state of violence, every time we undertake to resist their advances. One of our friends said, 'There is not an honest woman who is not tired of being so.' And what recompense do they offer us for the cruel torments to which they have condemned us? Do they raise up an altar to our heroism? No! The most honest woman, they say, is she who is not talked about, that is to say, a perfect indifference on the part of a woman; a general oblivion is the price of our virtue. Must women not have much of it to preserve it at such a price? Who would not be tempted to abandon it? But there are grave matters that cannot be overlooked.

"Dishonor closely follows upon weakness. Old age is dreadful in itself, what must it not be when it is passed in remorse? I feel the necessity of avoiding such a misfortune. I calculated at first that I could not succeed in doing so, without condemning myself to a life of austerity, and I had not the courage to undertake it. But it gradually dawned upon me that the condition of a society woman was alone competent to reconcile virtue with pleasure. From the smile on your face, I suspect such an idea appears to be a paradox to you. But it is more reasonable than you imagine.

"Tell me this: Is a society woman obliged to have an attachment? Is she not exempt from tenderness? It is sufficient for her to be amiable and courteous, everything on the surface. As soon as she becomes expert in the rôle she has undertaken, then the only mistrust the world has of her, is that she has no heart. A fine figure, haughty airs, caprices, fashionable jargon, fantasies, and fads, that is all that is required of her. She can be essentially virtuous with impunity. Does any one presume to make advances? If he meet with resistance he quickly gives over worrying her, he thinks her heart is already captured, and he patiently awaits his turn. His perseverance would be out of place, for she would notify a man who failed to pay her deference, that it was owing to arrangements made before he offered himself. In this way a woman is protected by the bad opinion had of her.

"I read in your eyes that you are about to say to me: The state of a professional society woman may injure my reputation, and plunge me into difficulties I seek to avoid. Is not that your thought? But do you not know, Monsieur, that the most austere conduct does not guard a woman from the shafts of malice? The opinion men give of women's reputation, and the good and wrong ideas they acquire of us are always equally false. It is prejudice; it is a species of fatality, which governs their judgment, so that our glory depends less upon a real virtue, than upon auspicious circumstances. The hope of filling an honorable place in their imagination, ought not to be the sole incentive to the practice of virtue, it should be the desire to have a good opinion of ourselves, and to be able to say, whatever may be the opinion of the public: I have nothing with which to reproach myself. But, what matters it to what we owe our virtue, provided we have it?

"I was therefore convinced that I could not do better, when I reappeared in the world, than to don the mask I deemed the most favorable to my peace of mind and to my glory. I became closely attached to the friend who aided me with her counsel. She is the Marquise de ---, a relative. Our sentiments were in perfect accord. We frequented the same society. Charity for our neighbors was truly not our favorite virtue. We made our appearance in a social circle as into a ballroom, where we were the only masks. We indulged in all sorts of follies; we goaded the absurd into showing themselves in their true character. After having amused ourselves in this comedy, we had not yet reached the limit of our pleasure; it was renewed in private interviews. How absolutely idiotic the women appeared to us, and the men, how vacuous, fatuous, and impertinent! If we found any who could inspire fear in a woman's heart – that is, esteem – we broke their heart by our airs, by affecting utter indifference for them, and by the allurements we heaped upon those who deserved them the least. By force of our experience, we came near believing, that in order to be

virtuous, it was necessary to frequent bad company.

“This course of conduct guaranteed us for a long time against the snares of love, and saved us from the dreadful weariness a sad and more mournful virtue would have spread over our lives. Frivolous, imperious, bold, even coquettish if you will, in the presence of men, but solid, reasonable, and virtuous in our own eyes. We were happy in this character. We never met a man we were afraid of. Those who might have been redoubtable were obliged to make themselves ridiculous, before being permitted to enjoy our society.

“But what finally led me to doubt the truth of my principles, is they did not always guard me from the dangers I wished to avoid. I have learned through my own experience, that love is a traitor with whom it will not do to trifle. I do not know by what fatality, the Marquis de Sévigné was able to render my projects futile. In spite of all my precautions he has found the way to my heart. However much I resisted him I was impelled to love him, and my reason is of no more use to me except to justify in my own eyes the inclination I feel for him. I would be happy if he never gave me an occasion to change my sentiments. I have been unable to hide from him my true thoughts, I was afraid at

first, that he might deem me actually as ridiculous as I seemed to be. And when my sincerity shall render me less amiable in his eyes (for I know that frivolity captures men more than real merit), I wish to show myself to him in my true colors. I should blush to owe nothing to his heart but a perpetual lie of my whole being.”

“I am still less surprised, Madame,” said Monsieur de la Sablière, “at the novelty of your project, than at the skill with which you have succeeded in rendering such a singular idea plausible. Permit me to say, that it is not possible to go astray with more spirit. Have you experimented with everybody according to your system? Men go a long way around to avoid the beaten track, but they all fall over the same obstacles. To make use of the privilege you granted me to tell you plainly my thought, believe me, Countess, that the only way for you to preserve your peace of mind is to resume openly your position as a reasonable woman. There is nothing to be gained by compounding with virtue.”

When I heard the conversation taking that complexion, I knew it would soon finish, and I therefore promptly withdrew, and could not think of anything but satisfying your curiosity. I am tired of writing. In two days I shall return to Paris.