

XXXIX – *The True Value of Compliments Among Women*

The marks left by the smallpox on the Marquise's face have set her wild. Her resolution not to show herself for a long time does not surprise me. How could she appear in public in such a state? If the accident, which humiliates her, had not happened, how she would have made the poor Chevalier suffer! Does not this prove that female virtue depends upon circumstances, and diminishes with pride?

How I fear a similar example in the case of the Countess! Nothing is more dangerous for a woman than the weaknesses of her friend; love, already too seductive in itself, becomes more so through the contagion of example, if I may so speak; it is not only in our heart that it gathers strength, it acquires new weapons against reason from its environment. A woman who has fallen under its ban, deems herself interested, for her own justification, in conducting her friend to the edge of the same precipice, and I am not, therefore, surprised at what the Marquise says in your favor. Up to the present moment they have been guided by the same principles; what a shame, then, for her, that the Countess could not have been guaranteed against the effects of it! Now, the Marquise has a strong reason the more for contributing to the defeat of her friend; she has become positively ugly, and consequently obliged to be more complaisant in retaining a lover. Will she suffer another woman to keep hers at a less cost? That would be to recognize too humiliating a superiority, and I can assure you that she will do the most singular things to bring her amiable widow up to the point.

If she succeed, how much I fear everything will be changed! To have been as beautiful as another woman, and to be so no longer, although she embellishes herself every day, and to suffer her presence every day, is, I vow, an effort beyond the strength of the most reasonable woman, greater than the most determined philosophy. Among women, friendship ceases where rivalry begins. By rivalry, I mean that of

beauty only, it would be too much to add that of sentiment.

I foresee this with regret, but it is my duty to forewarn you. Whatever precautions the Countess may take to control the amour propre of the Marquise, she will never make anything else out of her than an ingrate. I do not know by what fatality, everything a beautiful woman tells one who is no longer beautiful, assumes in the mouth, an impression of a commiseration which breaks down the most carefully devised management, and humiliates her whom it is thought to console. The more a woman strives to efface the superiority she possesses over an unfortunate sister woman, the more she makes that superiority apparent, until the latter reaches the opinion that it is only through generosity that she is permitted to occupy the subordinate position left her.

You may depend upon it, Marquis, that women are never misled when it comes to mutual praise; they fully appreciate the eulogies interchanged among themselves, and as they speak without sincerity, so they listen with little gratitude. And although she who speaks, in praising the beauty of another, may do so in good faith, she who listens to the eulogy, considers less what the other says than her style of beauty. Is she ugly? We believe and love her, but if she be as handsome as we, we thank her coldly and disdain her; handsomer, we hate her more than before she spoke.

You must understand this, Marquis, that as much as two beautiful women may have something between them to explain, it is impossible for them to form a solid friendship. Can two merchants who have the same goods to sell become good neighbors? Men do not penetrate the true cause of the lack of cordiality among women. Those who are the most intimate friends often quarrel over nothing, but do you suppose this "nothing" is the real occasion of their quarrel? It is only the pretext. We hide the motive of our actions, when to reveal it would

be a humiliation. We do not care to make public the fact that it is jealousy for the beauty of our friend that is the real cause; to give that as the reason for estrangement would be to charge us with envy, a pleasure one woman will not give another – she prefers injustice. Whenever it happens that two beautiful women are so happy as to find a pretext to get rid of each other, they seize upon it with vivacity, and hate each other with a cordiality that proves how much they loved each other before the rupture.

Well, Marquis, am I talking to you with sufficient frankness? You see to what lengths

my sincerity goes. I try to give you just ideas of everything, even at my own expense, for I am assuredly not more exempt than another woman from the faults I sometimes criticize. But as I am sure that what passes between us will be buried in oblivion, I do not fear embroiling myself in a quarrel with all my sex, they might, perhaps, claim the right to blame my ingenuity.

But the Countess is above all such petty things; she agrees, however, with everything I have just said. Are there many women like her?