

## *Chapter II – Considered as a Parallel*

The birth of Ninon de l'Enclos was not heralded by salvoes of artillery, Te Deums, or such other demonstrations of joy as are attendant upon the arrival on Earth of princes and offspring of great personages. Nevertheless, for the ninety years she occupied the stage of life, she accomplished more in the way of shaping great national policies, successful military movements and brilliant diplomatic successes, than any man or body of men in the seventeenth century.

In addition to that, her genius left an impress upon music and the fine arts, an impress so profound that the high standard of excellence both have attained in our day is due to her efforts in establishing a solid foundation upon which it was possible to erect a substantial structure. Moreover, in her hands and under her auspices and guidance, languages, belles lettres, and rhetoric received an impetus toward perfection, and raised the French language and its literature, fiction, poetry and drama, to so high a standard, that its productions are the models of the twentieth century.

It was Ninon de l'Enclos whose brilliant mentality and intellectual genius formed the minds, the souls, the genius, of such master minds as Saint-Evremond, La Rochefoucauld, Molière, Scarron, La Fontaine, Fontenelle, and a host of others in literature and fine arts: the Great Condé, de Grammont, de Sévigné, and the flower of the chivalry of France, in war, politics, and diplomacy. Even Richelieu was not unaffected by her influence.

Strange power exerted by one frail woman, a woman not of noble birth, with only beauty, sweetness of disposition, amiability, goodness, and brilliant accomplishments as her weapons! It was not a case of the moth and the flame, but the operation of a wise philosophy, the precepts of which were decently, moderately and carefully inculcated; a philosophy upon the very edge of which modern society is hanging, afraid to accept openly, through too much attachment

to ancient doctrines which have drawn man away from happiness and comfort, and converted him into a bitter pessimism that often leads to despair.

As has already been suggested, had Ninon de l'Enclos sat upon a throne, or commanded an army, the pages of history would teem with the renown of her exploits, and great victories be awarded to her instead of to those who would have met with defeat without her inspiration.

Pompey, in his vanity, declared that he could raise an army by stamping his foot upon the ground, but the raising of Ninon de l'Enclos' finger could bring all the chivalry of Europe around a single standard, or at the same gentle signal, cause them to put aside their arms and forget everything but peace and amity. She dominated the intellectual geniuses of the long period during which she lived, and reigned over them as their absolute queen, through the sheer force of her personal charms, which she never hesitated to bestow upon those whom she found worthy, and who expressed a desire to possess them, studiously regulated, however, by the precepts and principles of the philosophy of Epicurus, which today is rapidly gaining ground in our social relations through its better understanding and appreciation.

Her life bears a great resemblance to the histories in which we read about the most celebrated women of ancient times, who occupied a middle station between the condition of marriage and prostitution – a class of women whose Greek name is familiarized to our ears in translations of Aristophanes. Ninon de l'Enclos was of the order of the French "hetaerae," and, as by her beauty and her talents, she attained the first rank in the social class, her name has come down to posterity with those of Aspasia and Leontium, while the less distinguished favorites of less celebrated men have shared the common oblivion, which hides from the memory of men, every degree of mediocrity, whether of virtue or vice.

A class of this kind, a status of this singular nature existing amongst accomplished women, who inspired distinguished men with lofty ideals, and developed the genius of men who, otherwise would have remained in obscurity, can never be uninteresting or un-instructive; indeed, it must afford matter for serious study. They are prefigures, or prototypes of the influence that aims to sway mankind at the present day in government, politics, literature, and the fine arts.

As a distinguished example of such a class, the most prominent in the world, in fact, apart from a throne, Ninon de l'Enclos will peculiarly engage the attention of all who, whether for knowledge or amusement, are observers of human nature under all its varieties and circumstances.

It would be idle to enter upon a historical digression on the state of female manners in ancient Athens, or in Europe during the last three centuries. The reader should discard them from his mind when he peruses the life of Ninon de l'Enclos, and examine her character and environments from every point of view, as a type toward which is trending modern social conditions.

At first blush, and to a narrow intellect, an individual woman of the character of Ninon de l'Enclos would seem hopelessly lost to all virtue, abandoned by every sense of shame, and irreclaimable to any feeling of social or private duty. But only at first blush, and to the most circumscribed of narrow minds, who, fortunately, do not control the policy of mankind, although occasional disorders here and there indicate that they are endeavoring to do so.

A large majority of mankind are of the settled opinion that every virtue is bound up in that of chastity. Our manners and customs, our laws, most of our various kinds of religions, our national sentiments and feelings – all our most serious opinions, as well as our dearest and best rooted prejudices, forbid the dissevering, in the minds of women of any class, the ideas of virtue and female honor. That is, our public opinion is along that line. To raise openly a doubt on

this head, or to disturb, on a point considered so vital, the settled notions of society, is equally inconsistent with common prudence and the policy of common honesty; and as tending to such an end, we are apt to consider all discussion on the subject as at least officiously incurring danger, without an opportunity of inculcating good.

But, however strongly we insist upon this opinion for such purposes, there are others in which it is not useless to relax that severity for a moment, and to view the question, not through the medium of sentiment, but with an eye of philosophic impartiality. We are gradually nearing the point, where it is conceded that in certain conditions of society, one failing is not wholly incompatible with a general practice of virtue – a remark to be met with in every homily since homilies were written, notwithstanding that rigid rule already alluded to in the previous chapter.

It is surprising that it has never occurred to any moralist of the common order, who deals chiefly with such general reflections, to apply this particular maxim to this particular social status. We follow the wise precepts of honesty found in Cicero, although we know that he was, at the time he was writing them, plundering his fellow men at every opportunity. Our admiration for Bacon's philosophy and wisdom reaches adulation although he was the "meanest of men," and was guilty of the most flagrant crimes such as judicial bribery and political corruption. We read that Aspasia had some great and many amiable qualities; so too had Ninon de l'Enclos; and it is worthy of consideration, how far we judge candidly or wisely in condemning such characters in gross, and treating their virtues as Saint Austin was wont to deal with those of his heathen adversaries, as no better than "splendid vices," so unparalleled in their magnitude as to become virtues by the operation of the law of extremes. There was no law permitting a man to marry his sister, and there was no law forbidding King Cambyses to do as he liked.

Another grave point to be considered is this: The world, as it now stands, its laws, systems of government, manners and customs, and social conditions, have been built up on these same "splendid vices," and whenever they have been tamed into subjection to mediocrity – let us say to clerical, or ecclesiastical domination – government, society and morals have retrograded. The social condition in France during Ninon de l'Enclos' time, and in England during the reign of Charles II, is startling evidence of this accusation. Moreover, it is fast becoming the condition today, a fact indicated by the almost universal demand for a revolution in social ethics, the foundation to which, for some reason, has become awry, threatening to topple down the structure erected upon it. Society can see nothing to originate, an incalculable number of attempts to better human conditions always

proving failures, and worsening the human status. It is dawning upon the minds of the true lovers of humanity, that there is nothing else to be done, but to revert to the past to find the key to any possible reform, and to that past we are edging rapidly, though, it must be said unwillingly, in the hope and expectation that the old foundations are possessed of sufficient solidity to support a new or remodeled structure.

The life of Ninon de l'Enclos, upon this very point, furnishes food for profitable reflection, inasmuch as it gives an insight into the great results to be obtained by the following of the precepts of an ancient philosophy which seems to have survived the clash of ages of intellectual and moral warfare, and to have demonstrated its capacity to supply defects in segregated dogmatic systems wholly incapable of any syncretic tendencies.