

### Chapter III – Youth of Ninon de l'Enclos

Anne de l'Enclos, or "Ninon," as she has always been familiarly called by the world at large, was born at Paris in 1615. What her parents were, or what her family, is a matter of little consequence. To all persons who have attained celebrity over the route pursued by her, original rank and station are not of the least moment. By force of his genius in hewing for himself a niche in history, Napoleon was truly his own ancestor, as it is said he loved to remark pleasantly. So with Ninon de l'Enclos, the novelty of the career she laid out for herself to follow, and did follow until the end with unwavering constancy, justifies us in regarding her as the head of a new line, or dynasty.

In the case of mighty conquerors, whose path was strewn with violence, even lust, no one thinks of an ignoble origin as is any manner derogatory to the eminence; on the contrary, it is considered rather as matter to be proud of; the idea that out of ignominy, surrounded by conditions devoid of all decency, justice, and piety, an individual can elevate himself up to the highest pinnacle of human power and glory, has always, and will always be regarded as an example to be followed, and the badge of success stretched to cover the means of its attainment. This is the universal custom where success has been attained, the failures being relegated to a well-merited oblivion as unworthy of consideration either as lessons of warning, or for any purpose. Our youth are very properly taught only the lessons of success.

It is in evidence that Ninon's father was a gentleman of Touraine and connected, through his wife, with the family of Abra de Raconis, a race of no mean repute in the Orleanois, and that he was an accomplished gentleman occupying a high position in society. Voltaire, however, declares that Ninon had no claim to a parentage of such distinction, that the rank of her mother was too obscure to deserve any notice, and that her father's profession was of no higher dignity than that of a teacher of the lute. This account is

not less likely, from the remarkable proficiency acquired by Ninon, at an early age, in the use of that instrument.

It is equally certain, however, that Ninon's parents were not obscure, and that her father was a man of many accomplishments, one of which was his skill as a performer on the lute, a fact, which may have induced Voltaire to mistake one of his talents for his regular profession.

Ninon's parents were as opposite in sentiments and disposition as the Poles of the Earth. Madame de l'Enclos was a prudent, pious Christian mother, who endeavored to inspire her daughter with the same pious sentiments which pervaded her own heart. The fact is that the mother attempted to prepare her daughter for a conventual life, a profession at that period of the highest honor, and one that led to preferment, not only in religious circles, but also in the world of society. At that time, conventual and monastic dignitaries occupied a prominent place in the formation of public and private manners and customs, and if not regarded impeccable, their opinions were always considered valuable in state matters of the greatest moment, even the security of thrones, the welfare and peace of nations sometimes depending upon their wisdom, judgment, and decisions.

With this laudable object in view, Madame de l'Enclos carefully trained her daughter in the holy exercises of her religion, to which she hoped to consecrate her entire life. But the fond mother met with an impasse, an insurmountable obstacle, in the budding Ninon herself, who, even in the temples of the Most High, when her parent imagined her to be absorbed in the contemplation of saintly things, and imbibing inspiration from her "Hours," the "Lives of the Saints," or "An Introduction to a Holy Life," a book very much in vogue at that period, the child would be devouring such profane books as Montaigne, Scarron's romances and Epicurus, as more in accordance with her trend of mind.

Even at the early age of twelve years, she had mastered those authors, and had laid out a course of life, not in accord with her good mother's ideas, for it excluded the idea of religion as commonly understood, and crushed out the sentiment of maternity, that crowning glory to which nearly all young female children aspire, although in them, at a tender age, it is instinctive and not based upon knowledge of its meaning.

This beginning of Ninon's departure from the beaten path should not be a matter of surprise, for all the young open their hearts to ideas that spring from the sentiments and passions, and anticipate in imagination the parts they are to play in the tragedy or comedy of life.

It is this period of life, which the moralist and educator justly contend should be carefully guarded. It is really a concession to environment, and a tacit argument against radical heredity as the foundation upon which rest the character and disposition of the adult, and which is the mainspring of his future moral conduct. It is impossible to philosophize ourselves out of this sensible position.

In the case of Ninon, there was her mother, a woman of undoubted virtue and exemplary piety, following the usual path in the training of her only child and making a sad failure of it, or at least not making any impression on the object of her solicitude. This was, however, not due to the mother's intentions. Her training was too weak to overcome that coming from another quarter. It has been said that Ninon's father and mother were as opposite as the Poles in character and disposition, and Ninon was suspended like a pendulum to swing between two extremes, one of which had to prevail, for there was no midway stopping place. It may be that the disciple of heredity, the opponent of environment will perceive in the result a strong argument in favor of his view of humanity. Be that as it may, Ninon swung away from the extreme of piety represented by her mother, and was caught at the other extreme by the less intellectually monotonous ideas of her father. There was no mental conflict in the young mind,

nothing difficult; on the contrary, she accepted his ideas as pleasanter and less conducive to pain and discomfort. Too young to reason, she perceived a flowery pathway, followed it, and avoided the thorny one offered her by her mother.

Monsieur de l'Enclos was an Epicurean of the most advanced type. According to him, the whole philosophy of life, the entire scheme of human ethics as evolved from Epicurus, could be reduced to the four following canons:

First – That pleasure which produces no pain is to be embraced.

Second – That pain which produces no pleasure is to be avoided.

Third – That pleasure is to be avoided which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain.

Fourth – That pain is to be endured which averts a greater pain, or secures a greater pleasure.

The last canon is the one that has always appealed to the religious sentiments, and it is the one which has enabled an army of martyrs to submit patiently to the most excruciating torments, to reach the happiness of Paradise: the pleasure contemplated as a reward for enduring the frightful pain. The reader can readily infer, however, from his daily experiences with the human family, that this construction is seldom put upon this canon, the world at large, viewing it from the Epicurean interpretation, which meant earthly pleasures, or the purely sensual enjoyments. It is certain that Ninon's father did not construe any of these canons according to the religious idea, but followed the commonly accepted version, and impressed them upon his young daughter's mind in all their various lights and shades.

Imbibing such philosophy from her earliest infancy, the father taking good care to press them deep into her plastic mind, it is not astonishing that Ninon should discard the more distasteful fruits to be painfully harvested by following her mother's tuition, and accept, the

easily gathered luscious golden fruit offered her by her father. Like all children and many adults, the glitter and the tinsel of the present enjoyment were too powerful and seductive to be resisted, or to be postponed for a problematic pleasure.

The very atmosphere which surrounded the young girl, and which she soon learned to breathe in deep, pleasurable draughts, was surcharged with the intoxicating oxygen of freedom of action, liberality, and unrestrained enjoyment. While still very young she was introduced into a select society of the choicest spirits of the age and speedily became their idol, a position she continued to occupy without diminution for over sixty years. No one, of all these men of the world, had ever seen so many personal graces united to so much intellectuality and good taste. Ninon's form was as symmetrical, elegant and yielding as a willow; her complexion of a dazzling white, with large sparkling eyes as black as midnight, and in which reigned modesty and love, and reason and voluptuousness. Her teeth were like pearls, her mouth mobile and her smile most captivating, resistless and adorable. She was the personification of majesty without pride or haughtiness, and possessed an open, tender and touching countenance upon which shone friendship and affection. Her voice was soft and silvery. Her arms and hands superb models for a sculptor, and all her movements and gestures manifested an exquisite, natural grace, which made her conspicuous in the most crowded drawing room.

As she was in her youth, so she continued to be until her death at the age of ninety years, an incredible fact but so well attested by the gravest and most reliable writers, who testify to the truth of it, that there is no room for doubt. Ninon attributed it not to any miracle, but to her philosophy, and declared that any one might exhibit the same peculiarities by following the same precepts. We have it on the most undoubted testimony of contemporaneous writers, who were intimate with him, that one of her dearest friends and followers, Saint-Evremond, at the age of eighty-nine years, inspired one of the famous beauties of the English Court with an ardent attachment.

The beauties of her person were so far developed at the age of twelve years, that she was the object of the most immoderate admiration on the part of men of the greatest renown, and her beauty is embalmed in their works either as a model for the world, or she is enshrined in song, poetry, and romance as the heroine.

In fact Ninon had as tutors the most distinguished men of the age, who vied with one another in embellishing her young mind with all the graces, learning and accomplishments possible for the human mind to contain. Her native brightness and active mind absorbed everything with an almost supernatural rapidity and tact, and it was not long before she became their peer, and her qualities of mind reached out so far beyond theirs in its insatiable longing, that she, in her turn, became their tutor, adviser and consoler, as well as their tender friend.