

Chapter IV – The Morals of the Period

Examples of the precocious talents displayed by Mademoiselle de l'Enclos are not uncommon in the twentieth century, but the application she made of them was remarkable and uncommon. Accomplished in music, learned and proficient in the languages, a philosopher of no small degree, and of a personal beauty sometimes called "beauté de diable," she appeared upon the social stage at a time when a new idol was an imperative necessity for the salvation of moral sanity, and the preservation of some remnants of personal decency in the sexual relations.

Cardinal Richelieu had just succeeded in consolidating the usurpations of the royal prerogatives on the rights of the nobility and the people, which had been silently advancing during the preceding reigns, and was followed by the long period of unexampled misgovernment, which oppressed and impoverished as well as degraded every rank and every order of men in the French kingdom, ceasing only with the Revolution.

The great Cardinal minister had built worse than he had intended, it is to be hoped; for his clerico-political system had practically destroyed French manhood, and left society without a guiding star to cement the rope of sand he had spun. Unable to subject the masterminds among the nobility to its domination, ecclesiasticism had succeeded in destroying them by augmenting royal prerogatives, which it could control with less difficulty. Public maxims of government, connected as they were with private morals, had debauched the nation, and plunged it into a depth of degradation out of which Richelieu and his whole entourage of clerical reformers could not extricate a single individual. It was a riot of theological morality.

The whole body of the French nobility and the middle class of citizens were reduced to a servile attendance on the court, as the only means of advancement and reward. Every species of industry and merit in these classes was

sedulously discouraged; and the motive of honorable competition for honorable things, being withdrawn, no pursuit or occupation was left them but the frivolous duties, or the degrading pleasures of the palace.

Next to the king, the women naturally became the first objects of their effeminate devotion, and it is difficult to say which were soonest corrupted by courtiers consummate in the arts of adulation, and unwearied in their exercise. The sovereign rapidly degenerated into an accomplished despot, and the women into intriguers and coquettes. Richelieu had indeed succeeded in subjecting the State to the rule of the Church, but Ninon was destined to play an important part in modifying the evils that afflicted society, and at least elevate its tone. From the methods she employed to effect this change, it may be suspected that the remedy was equivalent to the Hanemannian maxim, "Similia similibus curantur," a strange application of a curative agent in a case of moral decrepitude, however valuable and effective it may be in physical ailments.

The world of the twentieth century, bound up as it is in material progress, refuses to limit its objects and aims to the problematic enjoyment of the pleasures of Paradise in the great hereafter, or of suffering with stoicism the pains and misfortunes of this Earth as a means of avoiding the problematic pains of Hell. Future rewards and punishments are no longer incentives to virtue or right living. The only drag upon human acts of every kind is now that great political maxim, the non-observance of which has often deluged the earth with blood, "Sic utere tuo ut alienum non laedas," which is to say, "So use thine own as not to injure thy neighbor." It is a conventional principle, one of contract in reality, but it has become a great doctrine of equity and justice, and it is inculcated by our educational systems to the exclusion of the purely religious idea, and the elimination

of religious dogma, which tends to oppressive restraints, is carefully fostered.

There is another reason why men's minds are impelled away from the purely sentimental moral doctrines insisted upon by sectarianism, which is ecclesiasticism run riot; and the higher the education, the deeper we delve into the secret motives of that class of mankind, the deceptive outward appearances of which dominate the pages of history, which is, that the greatest and most glorious systems of government, the wisest and most powerful of rulers, the greatest and most liberal statesmen, heroes, and conspicuous conquerors, originated in violations of the Decalogue, and those nations and kingdoms which have been founded upon strictly ecclesiastical ideas, have all sunk beneath the shifting sands of time, or have become so degenerate as to be bywords and objects of derision.

From the same viewpoint, a strange phenomenon is observable in the world of literature, arts, and sciences. The brightest, greatest geniuses, whose works are pointed to with admiration, studied as models and standards, made the basis of youthful education, imitated, and even wept over by the sentimental, were, in their private lives, persons of the most depraved morals. Why this should be the case, it is impossible even to conjecture; the fact only remaining that it is so. Perhaps there are so many different standards of morality, that humanity, weary of the eternal bickering consequent upon the conflicts entered into for their enforcement, have made for themselves a new interpretation which they find less difficult to observe, and find more peace and pleasure in following.

To take a further step in the same direction, it is curious that in the lives of the Saints, those who spent their whole earthly existence in abstinence, works of the severest penance, and mortifications of the flesh, the tendency of demoniac influence was never in the direction of Sabbath breaking, profanity, idolatry, robbery, murder and covetousness, but always exerted itself to the fullest extent of its power in attacks upon chastity. All other visions were

absent in the hair-shirted, and self-scourgings brought out nothing but sexual idealities, sensual temptations. The reason for this peculiarity is not far to seek. What is dominant in the minds always finds egress when a favorable opportunity is presented, and the very thought of un-chastity as something to be avoided, leads to its contemplation, or its creation in the form of temptation. The virtue of chastity was the one law, and its observances and violations were studied from every point of view, and its numberless permissible and forbidden limitations expatiated upon to such a degree, that he who escaped them altogether could well attribute the result to the interposition of some supernatural power, the protection of some celestial guardian. One is reminded of the expression of St. Paul, "I had not known lust, had the law not said: thou shalt not covet." Lord Beaconsfield's opinion was, that excessive piety led to sexual disorders."

According to Ninon's philosophy, whatever tended to propagate immoderation in the sexual relations was rigidly eliminated, and chastity placed upon the same plane and in the same grade as other moral precepts, to be wisely controlled, regulated, and managed. She put all her morality upon the same plane, and thereby succeeded in equalizing corporeal pleasure, so that the entire scale of human acts produced a harmonious equality of temperament, whence goodness and virtue necessarily followed, the pathway being unobstructed.

It is too much to be expected, or even to be hoped for, that there will ever be any unanimity among moral reformers, or any uniformity in their standards of moral excellence. The educated world of the present day, reading between the lines of ancient history, and some that is not so very ancient, see ambition for place and power as the moving cause, the inspiration behind the great majority of revolutions, and they have come to apply the same construction to the great majority of moral agitations and movements for the reform of morals and the betterment of humanity, with pecuniary reward

or profit, however, added as the sine qua non of maintaining them.

Cure the agitation by removing the occasion for it, and Othello's occupation would be gone; hence, the agitation continues. As an eminent theologian declared with a conviction that went home to a multitude, at the Congress of

Religions, when the Colombian Exposition was in operation:

"If all the religions in the world are to be merged into one, who, or what will support the clergy that will be deprived of their salaries by the change in management?"

The Golden Calf and Aaron were there, but where was the angry Moses?