Chapter IX – Ninon's Friendships

Mademoiselle de l'Enclos never forgot a friend in a lover, indeed, the trait that stands out clear and strong in her character, is her whole hearted friendship for the men she loved, and she bestowed it upon them as long as they lived, for she outlived nearly all of them, and cherished their memories afterward. As has been said, Ninon de l'Enclos was Epicurean in the strictest sense, and did not rest her entire happiness on love alone, but included a friendship which went to the extent of making sacrifices. The men with whom she came in contact from time to time during her long life, were nothing to her from a pecuniary point of view, for she possessed an income sufficiently large to satisfy her wants and to maintain the social establishment she never neglected.

There was never, either directly or indirectly, any money consideration asked or expected in payment of her favors, and the man who would have dared offer her money as a consideration for anything, would have met with scorn and contempt and been expelled from her house and society, without ever being permitted to regain either. The natural wants of her heart and mind, and what she was pleased to call the natural gratifications of physical wants, were her mentors, and to them she listened, never dreaming of holding them at a pecuniary value.

One of her dearest friends was Scarron, once the husband of Madame de Maintenon, the pious leader of a debased court and the saintly mistress of the king of France. In his younger days, Scarron contributed largely to the pleasures of the Oiseaux des Tournelles, the ecclesiastical collar he then wore not being sufficient to prevent his enjoying worldly pleasures.

In the course of time Scarron fell ill, and was reduced to a dreadful condition, no one coming to his succor but Ninon. Like a tender, compassionate friend, she sympathized deeply with him, when he was carried to suburb Saint Germain to try the effects of the baths as an alleviation of his pains. Scarron did not complain, on the contrary, he was cheerful and always gay even when suffering tortures. There was little left of him, however, but an indomitable spirit burning in a crushed tenement of mortal clay. Not being able to come to her, Ninon went to him, and passed entire days at his side. Not only that, she brought her friends with her and established a small court around his bed, thus cheering him in his pain and doing him a world of good, which finally enabled his spirit to triumph over his mortal shell.

Instances might be multiplied, enough to fill a volume, of her devotion to her friends, whom she never abandoned and whom she was always ready with purse and counsel to aid in their difficulties. A curious instance is that of Nicolas Vauquelin, monsieur de Desyvetaux, whom she missed from her circle for several days. Aware that he had been having some family troubles, and that his fortune was menaced, she became alarmed, thinking that perhaps some misfortune had come upon him, for which reason she resolved to seek him and help him out of his difficulties. But Ninon was mistaken in supposing that so wise and gay an Epicurean could be crushed by any sorrow or trouble. Desyvetaux was enjoying himself in so singular a fashion that it is worth telling.

This illustrious Epicurean, finding one night a young girl in a fainting condition at his door, brought her into his house to succor her, moved by an impulse of humanity. But as soon as she had recovered her senses, the philosopher's heart was touched by her beauty. To please her benefactor the girl played several selections on a harp and accompanied the instrument with a charming and seductive voice.

Desyvetaux, who was a passionate admirer of music, was captivated by this accomplishment, and suddenly conceived the desire to spend the rest of his days in the company of this charming singer. It was not difficult for a girl who had been making it her business to frequent the wine shops of the suburbs with a

brother, earning a precarious living by singing and playing on the harp, to accept such a proposition, and consent to bestow happiness upon an excessively amorous man, who offered to share with her a luxurious and tranquil life in one of the finest residences in the suburb Saint Germain.

Although most of his life had been passed at court as the governor of M. de Vendôme, and tutor of Louis XIII, he had always desired to lead a life of peace and quiet in retirement. The pleasures of a sylvan life, which he had so often described in his lectures, ended by leading his mind in that direction. The young girl he found on his doorstep had offered him his first opportunity to have a Phyllis to his Corydon and he eagerly embraced it. Bath yielded to the fancy; she dressed in the garb of a shepherdess, he playing the rôle of Corydon at the age of seventy years.

Sometimes stretched out on a carpet of verdure, he listened to the enchanting music she drew from her instrument, or drank in the sweet voice of his shepherdess singing melodious pastorals. A flock of birds, charmed with this harmony, left their cages to caress with their wings, Dupuis' harp, or intoxicated with joy, fluttered down into her bosom. This little gallantry in which they had been trained was a delicious spectacle to the shepherd philosopher and intoxicated his senses. He fancied he was guiding with his mistress innumerable bands of intermingled sheep; their conversation was in tender eclogues composed by them both extemporaneously, the attractive surroundings inspiring them with poetry.

Ninon was amazed when she found her "bon homme," as she called him, in the startlingly original disguise of a shepherd, a crook in his hand, a wallet hanging by his side, and a great flapping straw hat, trimmed with rose colored silk on his head. Her first impression was that he had taken leave of his senses, and she was on the point of shedding tears over the wreck of a once brilliant mind, when Desyvetaux, suspending his antics long enough to look about him, perceived her and rushed to her side with the liveliest expressions of joy. He removed her suspicions of his sanity by explaining his metamorphosis in a philosophical fashion:

"You know, my dear Ninon, there are certain tastes and pleasures which find their justification in a certain philosophy when they bear all the marks of moral innocence. Nothing can be said against them but their singularity. There are no amusements less dangerous than those which do not resemble those generally indulged in by the multitude."

Ninon was pleased with the amiable companion of her old friend. Her figure, her mental attainments, and her talents enchanted her, and Desyvetaux, who appeared in a ridiculous light when she first saw him in his masquerade, now seemed to her to be on the road to happiness. She made no attempt to persuade him to return to his former mode of life, which she could not avoid at this moment, however, as considering more agreeable than the new one he had adopted. But what could she offer in the way of superior seductive pleasures to a pair who had tasted pure and natural enjoyments? The vain amusements and allurements of the world have no sympathy with anything but dissipation, in which, the mind, yielding to the fleeting seductions of art, leaves the heart empty as soon as the illusion disappears.

The strange conduct of Desyvetaux gave birth to numerous reflections of this nature in Ninon's mind, but she did not cease to be his friend, on the contrary, she entered into the spirit of his simple life and visited him from time to time to enjoy the spectacle of such a tender masquerade which Desyvetaux continued up to the time of his death. It gave Mademoiselle Dupuis nearly as much celebrity as her lover attained, for when the end came, she obeyed his desire to play a favorite dance on her harp, to enable his soul to take fight in the midst of its delicious harmony. It should be mentioned, that Desyvetaux wore in his hat as long as he lived, a yellow ribbon, "out of love for the gentle Ninon who gave it to me."

Socrates advises persons of means to imitate the swans, which, realizing the benefit of

an approaching death, sing while in their death agony. The Abbé Brantôme relates an interesting story of the death of Mademoiselle de Lineul, the elder, one of the queen's daughters, which resembles that of Desyvetaux:

"When the hour of her death had arrived," says Brantôme, "Mademoiselle sent for her valet, Julian, who could play the violin to perfection. 'Julian,' quoth she, 'take your violin and play on it until you see me dead, for I am going – the Defeat of the Swiss, and play it as well as you know how; and when you shall reach the words "tout est perdu," play it over four or five times as piteously as you can,' which the other did. And when he came to 'tout est perdu' she sang it over twice; then turning to the other side of the couch, she said to those who stood around, 'Tout est perdu à ce coup et à bon escient;' 'all is lost this time, sure.'"