

## *Chapter V – Ninon and Count de Coligny*

It was impossible for a maiden trained in the philosophy of Epicurus, and surrounded by a brilliant society who assiduously followed its precepts, to avoid being caught in the meshes of the same net spread for other women. Beloved and even idolized on all sides, as an object that could be worshiped without incurring the displeasure of Richelieu, who preferred his courtiers to amuse themselves with women and gallantries rather than meddle with state affairs; and being disposed both through inclination and training to accept the situation, Ninon felt the sentiments of the tender passion, but philosophically waited for a worthy object.

That object appeared in the person of the young Gaspard, Count de Coligny, and afterwards Duc de Chatillon, who paid her assiduous court. The result was that Ninon conceived a violent passion for the Count, which she could not resist, in fact did not care to resist, and she therefore yielded to the young man of distinguished family, charming manners, and a physically perfect specimen of manhood.

It is alleged by Voltaire and repeated by Cardinal de Retz, that the early bloom of Ninon's charms was enjoyed by Richelieu, but if this be true, it is more than likely that Ninon submitted through policy and not from any affection for the great Cardinal. It is certain, however, that the great statesman's attention had been called to her growing influence among the French nobility, and that he desired to control her actions, if not to possess her charms. She was a tool that he imagined he could utilize to keep his rebellious nobles in his leash. Abbé Raconis, Ninon's uncle, and the Abbé Boisrobert, her friend, who stood close to the Cardinal, had suggested to His Eminence that the charms of the new beauty could be used to advantage in state affairs, and he accordingly sent for her at first through curiosity, but when he had seen her he hoped to control her for his personal benefit.

Although occupied in vast projects, which his great genius and activity always conducted to a happy issue, the great man had not renounced the affections of his human nature, nor his intellectual gratifications. He aimed at everything, and did not consider anything beneath his dignity. Every day saw him engaged in cultivating a taste for literature and art, and some moments of every day were set apart for social gallantries. When it came to the art of pleasing and attracting women, we have the word of Cardinal de Retz for it, that he was not always successful. Perhaps it is only inferior minds that possess the art and the genius of seduction.

The intriguing Abbé, in order to bring Ninon under the influence of his master, and to charm her with the great honor done her by a man upon whom were fixed the eyes of all Europe, prepared a series of gorgeous fetes, banquets and entertainments at the palace at Rueil. But Ninon was not in the least overwhelmed, and refused to hear the sighs of the great man. Hoping to inspire jealousy, he affected to love Marion de Lormes, a proceeding that gave Ninon great pleasure as it relieved her from the importunities of the Cardinal. The end of it was, that Richelieu gave up the chase and left Ninon in peace to follow her own devices in her own way.

Whatever may have been the relations between Ninon and Cardinal Richelieu, it is certain that the Count de Coligny was her first sentimental attachment, and the two lovers, in the first intoxication of their love, swore eternal constancy, a process common to all new lovers and believed possible to maintain. It was not long, however, before Ninon perceived that the first immoderate transports of love gradually lost their activity, and by applying the precepts of her philosophy to explain the phenomenon, came to regard love by its effects, as a blind mechanical movement, which it was the policy of men to ennoble according to the conventional

rules of decency and honor, to the exclusion of its original meaning.

After coldly reasoning the matter out to its only legitimate conclusion, she tore off the mask covering a metaphysical love, which could not reach or satisfy the light of intelligence or the sentiments and emotions of the heart, and which appeared to possess as little reality as the enchanted castles, marvels of magic, and monsters depicted in poetry and romance. To her, love finally became a mere thirst, and a desire for pleasure to be gratified by indulgence like all other pleasure. The germ of philosophy already growing in her soul, found nothing in this discovery that was essentially unnatural; on the contrary, it was essentially natural. It was clear to her logical mind, that a passion like love produced among men different effects according to different dispositions, humors, temperament, education, interest, vanity, principles, or circumstances, without being, at the same time, founded upon anything more substantial than a disguised, though ardent desire of possession, the essential of its existence, after which it vanished as fire disappears through lack of fuel. Dryden, the celebrated English poetic and literary genius, reaches the same opinion in his *Letters to Clarissa*.

Having reached this point in her reasoning, she advanced a step further, and considered the unequal division of qualities distributed between the two sexes. She perceived the injustice of it and refused to abide by it. "I perceive," she declared, "that women are charged with everything that is frivolous, and that men reserve to themselves the right to essential qualities. From this moment I shall be a man."

All this growing out of the ardor of a first love, which is always followed by the lassitude of satiety, so far from causing Ninon any tears of regret, nerved her up to a philosophy different from that of other women, and makes it impossible to judge her by the same standard. She cannot be considered a woman subject to a thousand fantasies and whims, a thousand trifling concealed proprieties of position and custom. Her morals became the same as those

of the wisest and noblest men of the period in which she lived, and raised her to their rank, instead of maintaining her in the category of the intriguing coquettes of her age.

It is not improbable that her experience of the suffering attendant upon the decay of such attachments, a suffering alluded to by those who contemplate only the intercourse of the sexes through the medium of poetry and sentiment, had considerable influence in determining her future conduct. At an early age, following upon her liaison with Count Coligny, she adopted the determination she adhered to during the rest of her life, of retaining so much only of the female character as was forced upon her by nature and the insuperable laws of society. Acting on this principle, her society was chiefly composed of persons of her adopted sex, of whom the most celebrated of their time made her house a constant place of meeting.

A curious incident in her relations with Count de Coligny was her success in persuading him to adjure the errors of the Huguenots, and return to the Roman Catholic Church. She had no religious predilections, feeling herself spiritually secure in her philosophic principles, but sought only his welfare and advancement. His obstinacy was depriving him of the advantages due his birth and personal merit. Considering that Ninon was scarcely sixteen years of age, respiring nothing but love and pleasure, to effect by tenderness and the persuasive strength of her reasoning powers, such a change in a man so obstinate as the Count de Coligny, in an obstinate and excessively bigoted age, was something unique in the history of lovers of that period. Women then cared very little for religious principles, and rarely exerted themselves in advancing the cause of the dominant religion, much less thought of the spiritual needs of their favorites. The reverse is the rule in these modern times, when women are the most ardent and persistent proselytizers of the various sects, a custom which recalls the remark of a distinguished lawyer who failed to recover any assets from a notorious bankrupt he was pursuing for

the defrauded creditors, "This man has everything in his wife's name – even his religion."

Ninon's disinterested counsel prevailed, and the Count afterward abjured his errors, becom-

ing the Duc de Chatillon, Marquis d' Andelot, and died a lieutenant general, bravely fighting for his country, at Charenton.