

Chapter VI – The “Birds” of the Tournelles

Having decided upon her career, Ninon converted her property into prudent and safe securities, and purchased a city house in the Rue des Tournelles au Marais, a locality at that time the center of fashionable society, and another for a summer residence at Picpusse, in the environs of Paris. A select society of wits and gallant chevaliers soon gathered around her, and it required influence as well as merit to gain an entrance into its ranks. Among this élite were Count de Grammont, Saint-Evremond, Chappelle, Molière, Fontenelle, and a host of other no less distinguished characters, most of them celebrated in literature, arts, sciences, and war. Ninon christened the society “Oiseaux des Tournelles,” an appellation much coveted by the beaux and wits of Paris, and which distinguished the chosen company from the less favored gentlemen of the great metropolis.

Among those who longed for entrance into this charming society of choice spirits was the Count de Charleval, a polite and accomplished chevalier, indeed, but of no particular standing as a literary character. Nothing would do, however, but a song of triumph as a test of his competency and he accomplished it after much labor and consumption of midnight oil. Scarron has preserved the first stanza in his literary works, the others being lost to the literary world, perhaps with small regret. The sentiments expressed in the first stanza rescued from oblivion will be sufficient to indicate the character of the others:

“Je ne suis plus oiseau des champs,
Mais de ces oiseaux des Tournelles
Qui parlent d’amour en tout temps,
Et qui plaignent les tourterelles
De ne se baiser qu’au printemps.”

Which liberally translated into English will run substantially as follows:

“No more am I a wild bird on the wing,

But one of the birds of the Towers, who
The love in their hearts always sing,
And pity the poor Turtle Doves that coo
And never kiss only in spring.”

Scarron alludes to the delicacy of the Count’s taste and the refinement of his wit, by saying of him, “The muses brought him up on blanc mange and chicken broth.”

How Ninon kept together this remarkable coterie can best be understood by an incident unparalleled in female annals. The Count de Fièsque, one of the most accomplished nobles of the French court, had it appears, grown tired of an attachment of long standing between Ninon and himself, before the passion of the former had subsided. A letter, containing an account of his change of sentiments, with reasons therefore, was presented his mistress, while employed at her toilette in adjusting her hair, which was remarkable for its beauty and luxuriance, and which she regarded as the apple of her eye. Afflicted by the unwelcome intelligence, she cut off half of her lovely tresses on the impulse of the moment, and sent them as her answer to the Count’s letter. Struck by this unequivocal proof of the sincerity of her devotion to him, the Count returned to his allegiance to a mistress so devoted, and thenceforward retained it until she herself wearied of it and desired a change.

As an illustration of her sterling honesty in money matters and her delicate manner of ending a liaison, the following anecdote will serve to demonstrate the hold she was able to maintain upon her admirers.

M. de Gourville, an intimate friend of Ninon’s, adhered in the wars of the Fronde to the party of the Prince of Condé, one of the “Birds of the Tournelles.” Compelled to quit Paris, to avoid being hanged in person, as he was in effigy, he divided the care of a large sum of ready money between Ninon de l’Enclos and the Grand Pénitencier of Notre Dame. The

money was deposited in two caskets. On his return from exile, he applied to the priest for the return of his money, but to his astonishment, all knowledge of the deposit was denied, and that if any such deposit had been made, it was destined for charitable purposes under the rules of the Pénitencier, and had most probably been distributed among the poor of Paris. De Gourville protested in vain, and when he threatened to resort to forcible means, the power of the church was invoked to compel him to abandon his attempt. So cruelly disappointed in a man whom all Paris deemed incorruptibly honest, de Gourville suspected nothing else from Made-moiselle de l'Enclos. It was absurd to hope for probity in a woman of reprehensible habits when that virtue was absent in a man who lived a life of such austerity as the Grand Pénitencier, hence he determined to abstain from visiting her altogether, lest he might hate the woman he had so fondly loved.

Ninon, however, had other designs, and learning that he had returned, sent him a pressing invitation to call upon her.

"Ah! Gourville," she exclaimed as soon as he appeared, "a great misfortune has happened me in consequence of your absence."

That settled the matter in de Gourville's mind, his money was gone and he was a pauper. Plunged in mournful reflections, de Gourville dared not raise his eyes to those of his mistress. But she, mistaking his agitation, went on hastily:

"I am sorry if you still love me, for I have lost my love for you, and though I have found another with whom I am happy, I have not forgotten you. Here," she continued, turning to her escritoire, "here are the twenty thousand crowns you entrusted to me when you departed. Take them, my friend, but do not ask anything from a heart that is no longer disposed in your favor. There is nothing left but the most sincere friendship."

Astonished at the contrast between her conduct and that of her reverend co-depositary, and recognizing that he had no right to complain of the change in her heart because of his

long absence, de Gourville related the story of the indignity heaped upon him by a man of so exalted a character and reputation.

"You do not surprise me," said Ninon, with a winning smile, "but you should not have suspected me on that account. The prodigious difference in our reputations and conditions should have taught you that." Then adding with a twinkle in her eye:

"Ne suis-je pas la gardeuse de la cassette?"

Ninon was afterward called "La belle gardeuse de cassette," and Voltaire, whose vigilance no anecdote of this nature could escape, has made it, with some variations, the subject of a comedy, well known to every admirer of the French drama, under the name of "La Dépositaire."

Ninon had her preferences, and when one of her admirers was not to her taste, neither prayers nor entreaties could move her. Hers was not a case of vendible charms, it was le bon appetit merely, an Epicurean virtue. The Grand Prior of Vendôme had reason to comprehend this trait in her character.

The worthy Grand Prior was an impetuous wooer, and he saw with great sorrow that Ninon preferred the Counts de Miossens and de Palluan to his clerical attractions. He complained bitterly to Ninon, but instead of being softened by his reproaches, she listened to the voice of some new rival when the Grand Prior thought his turn came next. This put him in a great rage, and he resolved to be revenged and this is the way he fancied he could obtain it. One day shortly after he had left Ninon's house, she noticed on her dressing table a letter, which she opened to find the following effusion:

"Indigne de mes feux, indigne de mes
larmes,
Je renonce sans peine à tes faibles appas;
Mon amour to prêtait des charmes,
Ingrate, que to n'avais pas"

Or, as might be said, substantially in English:

“Unworthy my flame, unworthy a tear,
I rejoice to renounce thy feeble allure;
My love lent thee charms that endear,
Which, ingrate, thou couldst not procure.”

Instead of being offended, Ninon took this mark of unreasonable spite good naturedly, and replied by another quatrain based upon the same rhyme as that of the disappointed suitor:

“Insensible à tes feux, insensible a tes
larmes,

Je te vois renoncer à mes faibles appas;
Mais si l'amour prête des charmes,
Pourquoi n'en empruntais-tu pas”

Which is as much as to say in English:

“Caring naught for thy flame, caring
naught for thy tear,
I see thee renounce my feeble allure;
But if love lends charms that endear,
By borrowing thou mightst sonic procure.”