

## Chapter VII – Effect of Her Mother’s Death

It is not to be wondered at that a girl under such tutelage should abandon herself wholly, both mind and body, to a philosophy so contrary in its principles and practices to that which her mother had always endeavored to instill into her young mind. The father was absent fighting for Heaven alone knew which faction into which France was broken up, there were so many of them, and the mother and daughter lived apart, the disparity in their sentiments making it impossible for them to do otherwise. For this reason, Ninon was practically her own mistress, and not interfered with because the husband and wife could not agree upon any definite course of life for her to follow. Ninon’s heart, however, had not lost any of its natural instincts, and she loved her mother sincerely, a trait in her which all Paris learned with astonishment when her mother was taken down with what proved to be a fatal illness.

Madame de l’Enclos, separated from both her husband and daughter, and devoting her life to pious exercises, acquired against them the violent prejudices natural in one who makes such a sacrifice upon the altar of sentiment. The worldly life of her daughter gave birth in her mind to an opinion, which she deemed the natural consequence of it. The love of pleasure, in her estimation, had destroyed every vestige of virtue in her daughter’s soul and her neglect of her religious duties had converted her into an unnatural being.

But she was agreeably diverted from her ill opinion when her malady approached a dangerous stage. Ninon flew to her mother’s side as soon as she heard of it, and without becoming an enemy of her philosophy of pleasure, she felt it incumbent upon her to suspend its practice. Friendship, liaisons, social duties, pleasure, everything ceased to amuse her or give her any satisfaction. The nursing of her sick mother engaged her entire attention, and her fervor in this dutiful occupation astonished Madame de l’Enclos and softened her heart to the extent

of acknowledging her error and correcting her estimate of her daughter’s character. She loved her daughter devotedly and was happy in the knowledge that she was as devotedly loved. But this was not the kind of happiness that could prolong her days.

Notwithstanding all her philosophy, Ninon could not bear the spectacle presented by her dying parent. Her soul was rent with a grief, which she did not conceal, unashamed that philosophy was impotent to restrain an exhibition of such a natural weakness. Moreover, her dying mother talked to her long and earnestly, and with her last breath gave her loving counsel that sank deep into her heart, already softened by an uncontrollable sorrow and weakened by long vigils.

Scarcely had Madame de l’Enclos closed her eyes upon the things of Earth, than Ninon conceived the project of withdrawing from the world and entering a convent. The absence of her father left her absolute mistress of her conduct, and the few friends who reached her, despite her express refusal to see any one, could not persuade her to alter her determination. Ninon, heart broken, distracted and desolate, threw herself bodily into an obscure convent in the suburbs of Paris, accepting it, in the throes of her sorrow, as her only refuge and home on Earth.

Saint-Evremond, in a letter to the Duke d’Olonne, speaks of the sentiment that is incentive to piety:

“There are some whom misfortunes have rendered devout through a certain kind of pity for themselves, a secret piety, strong enough to dispose men to lead more religious lives.”

Scarron, one of Ninon’s closest friends, in his Epistle to Sarrazin, thus alludes to this conventual escapade:

“Puis j’aurais su \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Ce que l'on dit du bel et saint exemple  
 Que la Ninon donne à tous les mondains,  
 En se logeant avecque les nonais,  
 Combien de pleurs la pauvre jouvencelle,  
 A repandus quand sa mère, sans elle,  
 Cierges brûlants et portant écussons,  
 Prêtres chantant leurs funèbres chanson,  
 Voulut aller de linge enveloppée,  
 Servir aux vers d'une franche lippée."

Which, translated into reasonable English,  
 is as much as saying:

"But I might have known \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*

What they say of the example, so holy, so  
 pure,  
 That Ninon gives to worldlings all,  
 By dwelling within a nunnery's wall.  
 How many tears the poor lorn maid  
 Shed, when her mother, alone, unafraid,  
 Mid flaming tapers with coats of arms,  
 Priests chanting their sad funereal alarms,  
 Went down to the tomb in her winding  
 sheet  
 To serve for the worms a mouthful sweet."

But the most poignant sorrow of the human heart is assuaged by time. Saint-Evremond and Marion de Lormes, Richelieu's "belle amie," expected to profit by the calm which they knew would not be long in stealing over the heart of their friend. Marion, however, despaired of succeeding through her own personal influence, and enlisted the sympathies of Saint-Evremond, who knew Ninon's heart too well to imagine for a moment that the mournful, monotonous life she had embraced would satisfy her very long. It was something to be admitted to her presence and talk over matters, a privilege they were accorded after some demur. The first step toward ransoming their friend was followed by others until they finally made great strides through her resolution. They brought her back in triumph to the world she had quitted through

a species of "frivolity," so they called it, of which she was never again guilty as long as she lived.

This episode in Ninon's life is in direct contrast with one which occurred when the Queen Regent, Anne of Austria, listening to the complaints of her jealous maids of honor, attempted to dispose of Ninon's future by immuring her in a convent. Ninon's celebrity attained such a summit, and her drawing rooms became so popular among the élite of the French nobility and desirable youth, that sad inroads were made in the entourage of the Court, nothing but the culls of humanity being left for the ladies who patronized the royal functions. In addition to this, she excited the envy and jealousy of a certain class of women, whom Ninon called "Jansenists of love," because they practiced in public the puritanical virtues that they did not even have tact enough to render agreeable. It is conceivable that Ninon's brilliant attractions, not to say seductive charms, and her unparalleled power to attract to her society the brightest and best men of the nation, engendered the most violent jealousy and hatred of those whose feebler charms were ignored and relegated to the background. The most bitter complaints and accusations were made against her to the Queen Regent, who was beset on all sides by loud outcries against the conduct of a woman whom they were powerless to imitate, until, to quiet their clamors, she deemed it her duty to act.

Anne of Austria accordingly sent Ninon, by special messenger, a peremptory order to withdraw to a convent, giving her the power of selection. At first Anne intended to send her to the convent of Repentant Girls (Filles Repenties), but the celebrated Bauton, one of the Oiseaux des Tournelles, who loved a good joke as well as he did Ninon, told her that such a course would excite ridicule because Ninon was neither a girl nor a repentant (ni file, ni repentie), for which reason, the order was changed leaving Ninon to her own choice of a prison. Ninon knew the source of the order, and foresaw that her numerous distinguished admirers would not have any difficulty in protecting her, and persuading the Queen Regent to rescind her order, and there-

fore gave herself no concern, receiving the order as a pleasantry.

“I am deeply sensible of the goodness of the court in providing for my welfare and in permitting me to select my place of retreat, and without hesitation, I decide in favor of the Grands Cordeliers.”

Now it so happened that the Grands Cordeliers was a monastery exclusively for men, and from, which women were rigidly excluded. Moreover, the morals of the holy brotherhood was not of the best, as the writers of their history during that period unanimously testify. M. de Guitaut, the captain of the Queen’s guard, who had been entrusted with the message, hap-

pened to be one of the “Birds,” and he assured the Regent that it was nothing but a little pleasantry on the part of Ninon, who merited a thousand marks of approval and commendation for her sterling and brilliant qualities of mind and heart rather than punishment or even censure.

The only comment made by the Queen Regent was, “Fie, the nasty thing!” accompanied by a fit of laughter. Others of the “Birds” came to the rescue, among them the Duc d’Enghien, who was known not to value his esteem for women lightly. The matter was finally dropped, Anne of Austria finding means to close the mouths of the envious.