

Chapter VIII – Her Increasing Popularity

Ninon's return to the gayeties of her drawing rooms was hailed with loud acclamations from all quarters. The envy and jealousy of her female enemies, the attempt to immure her in a convent, and her selection of the Grands Cordeliers as her place of retreat, brought her new friends and admirers through the notoriety given her, and all Paris resounded with the fame of her spirit, her wit, and her philosophy.

Ladies of high rank sought admission into her charming circle, many of them, it is to be imagined, because they possessed exaggerated ideas of her influence at court. Had she not braved the Queen Regent with impunity? Her drawing rooms soon became the center of attraction and were nightly crowded with the better part of the brilliant society of Paris. Ninon was the acknowledged guide and leader, and all submitted to her sway without the slightest envy or jealousy, and it may also be said, without the slightest compunctions or remorse of conscience.

The affair with the Queen Regent had one good effect, it separated the desirable from the undesirable in the social scale, compelling the latter to set up an establishment of their own as a counter attraction, and as their only hope of having any society at all. They established a "little court" at the Hôtel Rambouillet, where foppishness was a badge of distinction, and where a few narrow minded, starched moralists, poisoned metaphysics and turned the sentiments of the heart into a burlesque by their affectation and their unrefined, even vulgar attempts at gallantry. They culled choice expressions and epigrams from the literature of the day, employing their memories to conceal their paucity of original wit, and practiced upon their imaginations to obtain a salacious philosophy, which consisted of sodden ideas, flat in their expression, stale and unattractive in their adaptation.

Ninon's coterie was the very opposite, consisting as it did of the very flower of the nobility

and the choicest spirits of the age, who banished dry and sterile erudition, and sparkled with the liveliest wit and polite accomplishments. There were some who eluded the vigilance of Ninon's shrewd scrutiny, and made their way into her inner circle, but they were soon forced to abandon their pretensions by their inability to maintain any standing among a class of men who were so far beyond them in rank and attainments.

Not long after her return to the pleasures of society, after the convent episode, Ninon was called upon to mourn the demise of her father. M. de l'Enclos was one of the fortunate men of the times who escaped the dangers attendant upon being on the wrong side in politics. For some inscrutable reason, he took sides with Cardinal de Retz, and on that account was practically banished from Paris and compelled to be satisfied with the rough annoyances of camp life instead of being able to put in practice the pleasant precepts of his philosophy. He was finally permitted to return to Paris with his head safe upon his shoulders, and flattered himself with the idea that he could now make up for lost time, promising himself to enjoy to the full the advantages offered by his daughter's establishment. He embraced his daughter with the liveliest pleasure imaginable, taking upon himself all the credit for her great reputation as due to his efforts and to his philosophical training. He was flattered at the success of his lessons and entered upon a life of joyous pleasure with as much zest as though in the bloom of his youth. It proved too much for a constitution weakened by the fatigues of years of arduous military campaigns, and he succumbed, the flesh overpowered by the spirit, and took to his bed, where he soon reached a condition that left his friends no hope of his recuperation.

Aware that the end was approaching, he sent for his daughter, who hastened to his side and shed torrents of tears. But he bade her remember the lessons she had learned from his

philosophy, and wishing to give her one more lesson, said in an almost expiring voice:

“Approach nearer, Ninon; you see nothing left me but a sad memory of the pleasures that are leaving me. Their possession was not of long duration, and that is the only complaint I have to make against nature. But, alas! my regrets are vain. You who must survive me, utilize precious time, and have no scruples about the quantity of your pleasures, but only of their quality.”

Saying which, he immediately expired. The philosophical security exhibited by her father in his very last moments, inspired Ninon with the same calmness of spirit, and she bore his loss with equanimity, disdaining to exhibit any immoderate grief, lest she dishonor his memory and render herself an unworthy daughter and pupil.

The fortune left her by her father was not so considerable as Ninon had expected. It had been very much diminished by extravagance and speculation, but as she had in mind de la Rochefoucauld’s maxim, “There are some good marriages, but no delicious ones,” and did not contemplate ever wearing the chains of matrimony. She deposited her fortune in the sinking funds, reserving an income of about eight thousand lives per annum as sufficient to maintain her beyond the reach of want. From this time on she abandoned herself to a life of pleasure, well regulated, it must be confessed, and in strict accordance with her Epicurean ideas. Her light heartedness increased with her love and devotion to pleasure, which is not astonishing, as there are privileged souls who do not lose their tender emotions by such a pursuit, though those souls are rare. Ninon’s unrestrained freedom, and the privilege she claimed to enjoy all the rights which men assumed, did not give her the slightest uneasiness. It was her lovers who became anxious, unless they regulated their love according to the rules she established for them to follow, rules that it cannot be denied, were held in as much esteem then as nowadays. The following anecdote will serve as an illustration:

The Marquis de la Châtre had been one of her lovers for an unconscionably long period, but never seemed to cool in his fidelity. Duty, however, called him away from Ninon’s arms, but he was distressed with the thought that his absence would be to his disadvantage. He was afraid to leave her lest some rival should appear upon the scene and dispossess him in her affections. Ninon vainly endeavored to remove his suspicions.

“No, cruel one,” he said, “you will forget and betray me. I know your heart, it alarms me, crushes me. It is still faithful to my love, I know, and I believe you are not deceiving me at this moment. But that is because I am with you and can personally talk of my love. Who will recall it to you when I am gone?”

“The love you inspire in others, Ninon, is very different from the love you feel. You will always be in my heart, and absence will be to me a new fire to consume me; but to you, absence is the end of affection. Every object I shall imagine I see around you will be odious to me, but to you they will be interesting.”

Ninon could not deny that there was truth in the Marquis’ logic, but she was too tender to assassinate his heart, which she knew to be so loving. Being a woman, she understood perfectly the art of dissimulation, which is a necessary accomplishment, a thousand circumstances requiring its exercise for the sake of her security, peace, and comfort. Moreover, she did not at the moment dream of deceiving him; there was no present occasion, nobody else she had in mind. Ninon thought rapidly, but could not find any reason for betraying him, and therefore assured him of her fidelity and constancy.

Nevertheless, the amorous Marquis, who might have relied upon the solemn promise of his mistress, had it not been for the intense fears which were ever present in his mind, and becoming more violent as the hour for his departure drew nearer, required something more substantial than words. But what could he exact? Ah! an idea, a novel expedient occurred to his

mind, one which he imagined would restrain the most obstinate inconstancy:

"Listen, Ninon, you are without contradiction a remarkable woman. If you once do a thing you will stand to it. What will tend to quiet my mind and remove my fears, ought to be your duty to accept, because my happiness is involved and that is more to you than love; it is your own philosophy, Ninon. Now, I wish you to put in writing that you will remain faithful to me, and maintain the most inviolable fidelity. I will dictate it in the strongest form and in the most sacred terms known to human promises. I will not leave you until I have obtained such a pledge of your constancy, which is necessary to relieve my anxiety, and essential to my repose."

Ninon vainly argued that this would be something too strange and novel, foolish, in fact. The Marquis was obstinate and finally overcame her remonstrances. She wrote and signed a written pledge such as no woman had ever executed, and fortified with this pledge, the Marquis hastened to respond to the call of duty.

Two days had scarcely elapsed before Ninon was besieged by one of the most dangerous men of her acquaintance. Skilled in the art of love, he

had often pressed his suit, but Ninon had other engagements, and would not listen to him. But now, his rival being out of the field, he resumed his entreaties and increased his ardor. He was a man to inspire love, but Ninon resisted, though his pleading touched her heart. Her eyes at last betrayed her love and she was vanquished before she realized the outcome of the struggle.

What was the astonishment of the conqueror, who was enjoying the fruits of his victory, to hear Ninon exclaim in a breathless voice, repeating it three times, "Ah! Ah! le bon billet qu'à la Châtre !" (Oh, the fine bond that la Châtre has.)

Pressed for an explanation of the enigma, Ninon told him the whole story, which was too good to keep secret, and soon the "billet de la Châtre" became, in the mouth of everybody, a saying applied to things upon which it is not wise to rely. Voltaire, to preserve so charming an incident, has embalmed it in his comedy of *la Prude*, act I, scene III. Ninon merely followed the rule established by Madame de Sévigné, "Les femmes ont permission d'être faibles, et elles se servent sans scrupule de ce privilège."