

## *Chapter X – Some of Ninon's Lovers*

Notwithstanding her love of pleasure, and her admiration for the society of men, Ninon was never vulgar or common in the distribution of her favors, but selected those upon whom she decided to bestow them, with the greatest care and discrimination. As has been already said, she discovered in early life, that women were at a discount, and she resolved to pursue the methods of men in the acceptance or rejection of friendship, and in distributing her favors and influences. As she herself declared:

“I soon saw that women were put off with the most frivolous and unreal privileges, while every solid advantage was retained by the stronger sex. From that moment I determined on abandoning my own sex and assuming that of the men.”

So well did she carry out this determination, that she was regarded by her masculine intimates as one of themselves, and whatever pleasures they enjoyed in her society, were enjoyed upon the same principle as they would have delighted in a good dinner, an agreeable theatrical performance, or exquisite music.

To her and to all her associates, love was a taste emanating from the senses, a blind sentiment which assumes no merit in the object which gives it birth, as is the case of hunger, thirst, and the like. In a word, it was merely a caprice, the domination of which depends upon ourselves, and is subject to the discomforts and regrets attendant upon repletion or indulgence.

After her first experience with de Coligny, which was an abandonment of her cold philosophy for a passionate attachment she thought would endure forever, Ninon cast aside all that element in love which is connected with passion and extravagant sentiment, and adhered to her philosophical understanding of it, and kept it in its proper place in the category of natural appetites. To illustrate her freedom from passionate attachments in the distribution of her favors, the case of her friend Scarron will give an insight into her philosophy. Scarron had

received numerous favors from her, and being one of her select “Birds,” who had always agreed with la Rochefoucauld that, “There are many good marriages but none that are delicious,” she assumed that her friend would never entangle himself in the bonds of matrimony. But he did and to his sorrow.

When Ninon had returned to Paris after a long sojourn with the Marquis de Villarceaux, she found to her astonishment that Scarron had married the amiable but ignoble Mademoiselle d'Aubigné. This young lady was in a situation that precluded all hope of her ever attaining social eminence, but aspiring to rise, notwithstanding her common origin, she married Scarron as the first step upon the social ladder. Without realizing that this woman was to become the celebrated Madame de Maintenon, mistress of the king and the real power behind the throne, Ninon took her in charge and they soon became the closest and most affectionate friends, always together even occupying the same bed. Ninon's tender friendship for the husband continued in spite of his grave violation of the principles of his accepted philosophy, and when he was deserted, sick and helpless, she went to him and brought him cheer and comfort.

Ninon was so little imbued with jealousy that when she discovered a liaison between her own lover, Marquis de Villarceaux and her friend, Madame Scarron, she was not even angry. The two were carrying on their amour in secret, and as they supposed without Ninon's knowledge, whose presence, indeed, they deemed a restraint upon their freedom of action. The Marquis considered himself a traitor to Ninon, and Madame Scarron stood in fear of her reproaches for her betrayal. But Ninon, instead of taking either of them to task, as she would have been justified in doing, gently remonstrated with them for their secrecy, and by her kindness reassured both of them and relieved them from their embarrassment, making them understand

that she desired nothing so much as their happiness. Both the Marquis and his mistress made Ninon their confidante, and thereafter lived in perfect amity until the lovers grew tired of each other, Madame Scarron aiming higher than an ordinary Marquis, now that she saw her way clear to mounting the social ladder.

It was perhaps due to Ninon's kindness in the Villarceaux episode that enabled her to retain the friendship of Madame de Maintenon when the latter had reached the steps of the throne. The mistress of royalty endeavored to persuade Ninon to appear at court but there was too great a difference in temper and constitution between the two celebrated women to admit of any close relations. Ninon made use of the passion of love for the purpose of pleasure only, while her more exalted rival made it subservient to her ambitious projects, and did not hesitate with that view to cloak her licentious habits beneath the mantle of religion, and add hypocrisy to frailty. The income of Ninon de l'Enclos was agreeably and judiciously spent in the society of men of wit and letters, but the revenues of the Marchioness de Maintenon were squandered on the useless decoration of her own person, or hoarded for the purpose of elevating into rank and notice an insignificant family, who had no other claim to such distinction than that derived from the easy, honesty of a female relation, and the dissolute extravagance of a vain and licentious sovereign.

While Ninon de l'Enclos was receiving and encouraging the attentions of the most distinguished men of her time, literati, nobles, warriors, statesmen, and sages, in her house in the Rue des Tournelles, the mistress of the sovereign, the dear friend who had betrayed her to the Marquis de Villarceaux, was swallowing, at Versailles, the adulations of degraded courtiers of every rank and profession. There were met together there the vain and the ambitious, the designing and the foolish, the humblest and the proudest of those who, whether proud or humble, or ambitious, or vain, or crafty, were alike the devoted servants of the monarch or the monarch's mistress-princes, cardinals, bish-

ops, dukes and every kind of nobility, excisemen and priests, keepers of the royal conscience and necessary – all ministers of filth, each in his degree, from the secretaries of state to the lowest underlings in office-clerks of the ordnance, victualing, stamps, customs, colonies, and post office, farmers and receivers general, judges and cooks, confessors and every other caterer to the royal appetite. This was the order of things that Ninon de l'Enclos was contending against, and that she succeeded by methods that must be considered saintly compared with the others, stands recorded in the pages of history.

After Ninon had suffered from the indiscretion of the lover who made public the story of the famous pledge given la Châtre, she lost her fancy for the recreant, and though friendly, refused any closer tie. He knew that he had done Ninon an injury and begged to be reinstated in her favor. He was of charming manners and fascinating in his pleading, but he made no impression on her heart. She agreed to pardon him for his folly and declined to consider the matter further. Nor would she return to the conversation, although he persisted in referring to the matter as one he deeply regretted. When he was departing after Ninon had assured him of her pardon, she ran after him and called out as he was descending the stairs, "At least, Marquis, we have not been reconciled."

Her good qualities were embalmed in the literature of the day, very few venturing to lampoon her. Those who did so were greeted with so much derisive laughter that they were ashamed to appear in society until the storm had blown over.

M. de Tourielle, a member of the French Academy, and a very learned man, became enamored of her and his love-making assumed a curious phase. To show her that he was worthy of her consideration, he deemed it incumbent upon him to read her long dissertations on scientific subjects, and bored her incessantly with a translation of the orations of Demosthenes, which he intended dedicating to her in an elaborate preface. This was more than Ninon could

bear with equanimity – a lover with so much erudition, and his prosy essays, appealed more to her sense of humor than to her sentiments of love, and he was laughed out of her social circle. This angered the Academician and he thought to revenge himself by means of an epigram in which he charged Ninon with admiring figures of rhetoric more than a sensible academic discourse full of Greek and Latin quotations. It would have proved the ruin of the poor man had Ninon not come to his rescue, and explained to him the difference between learning and love. After which he became sensible and wrote some very good books.

It should be understood that Ninon had no secrets in which her merry and wise “Birds” did not share. She confided to them all her love affairs, gave them the names of her suitors, in fact, every wooer was turned over to this critical, select society, as a committee of investigation into quality and merit both of mind and body. In this way she was protected from the unworthy, and when she made a selection, they respected her freedom of choice, carefully guarding her lover and making him one of themselves after the fitful fever was over. They were all graduates in her school, good fellows, and had accepted Ninon’s philosophy without question.

Her lovers were always men of rank and station or of high talents, but she was caught once by the dazzle of a famous dancer named Pécour, who pleased her exceedingly, and who became the fortunate rival of the Duc de Choiseul, after-

ward a marshal of France. It happened that Choiseul was more remarkable for his valor than for his probity and solid virtues, and could not inspire in Ninon’s heart anything but the sterile sentiments of esteem and respect: He was certainly worthy of these, but he was too cold in his amorous desires to please Ninon.

“He is a very worthy gentleman,” said she, “but he never gives me a chance to love him.”

The frequent visits of Pécour excited the jealousy of the warrior, but he did not dare complain, not knowing whether things had reached a climax, and fearing that if he should mention the matter he might help them along instead of stopping them. One day, however, he attempted to goad his unworthy rival into some admission, and received a response that was enough to settle his doubts.

Pécour was in the habit of wearing a costume much resembling that of the military dandies of the period. Choiseul meeting him in this equivocal garb, proceeded to be funny at his expense by putting to him all sorts of ironical and embarrassing questions. But Pécour felt all the vanity of a successful rival, and was good-natured. Then the Duke began to make sneering remarks, which roused the dancer’s anger.

“Pray, what flag are you fighting under, and what body do you command?” asked Monsignor with a sarcastic smile.

Quick as a flash came the answer that gave the Duke an inkling into the situation. “Je commande un corps où vous servez depuis longtemps,” replied Pécour.