

Chapter XII – The Villarceaux Affair

Party politics raged around Ninon, her “Birds” being men of high rank and leaders with a large following. They were all her dearest friends, however, and no matter how strong personal passion was beyond her immediate presence, her circle was a neutral ground that no one thought of violating. It required her utmost influence and tenderness, however, to prevent outbreaks, but her unvarying sweetness of temper and disposition to all won their hearts into a truce for her sake. There were continual plots hatched against the stern rule of Richelieu, cabals and conspiracies without number were entered upon, but none of them resulted in anything. Richelieu knew very well what was going on, and he realized perfectly that Ninon’s drawing rooms were the center of every scheme concocted to drag him down and out of the dominant position he was holding against the combined nobility of France. But he never took a step toward suppressing her little court as a hotbed of restlessness; he rather encouraged her by his silence and his indifference. Complaints of her growing coterie of uneasy spirits brought nothing from him but, “As long as they find amusements they are not dangerous.” It was the forerunner of Napoleon’s idea along the same line, “We must amuse the people; then they will not meddle with our management of the government.”

It is preposterous to think of this minister of peace, this restless prelate, half soldier, half pastor, meddling in all these cabals and seditious schemes organized for his own undoing, but nevertheless, he was really the fomentor of all of them. They were his devices for preventing the nobility from combining against him. He set one cabal to watch another, and there was never a conspiracy entered into that he did not prepare a similar conspiracy through his numerous secret agents, and thus split into harmless nothings and weak attempts what would have been fatal to a continuance of his power. His tricks were nothing but the ordinary everyday

methods of the modern ward politician making the dear people believe he is doing one thing when he is doing another. The stern man pitted one antagonist against another until both sued for peace and pardon. The nobility were honest in their likes and dislikes, but they did not understand double-dealings, and therefore the craft of Richelieu was not even suspected.

Soon he corrupted, by his secret intrigues, the fidelity of the nobles and destroyed the integrity of the people. Then it was, as Cyrano says, “The world saw billows of scum vomited upon the royal purple and upon that of the church.” Vile rhyming poets, without merit or virtue, sold their villainous productions to the enemies of the state to be used in goading the people to riot. Obscene and filthy vaudevilles, defamatory libels and infamous slanders were as common as bread, and were hurled back and forth as evidence of an internecine strife which was raging around the wearer of the Roman scarlet, who was thereby justified in continuing his ecclesiastical rule to prevent the wrecking of the throne.

Ninon had always been an ardent supporter of the throne, and on that account imagined herself to be the enemy of Richelieu. There were many others who believed the same thing. They did not know that should the great Cardinal withdraw his hand for a single moment, there would not be any more throne. When the human hornets around him became annoying, he was accustomed to pretend to withdraw his sustaining hand, then the throne would tremble and totter, but he always came to the rescue; indeed, there was no other man who could rescue it. Cabals, plots, and conspiracies became so thick around Ninon at one period that she was frightened. Scarron’s house became a rendezvous for the factious and turbulent. Madame Scarron was aiming at the throne, that is, she was opening the way to capture the heart of the king. This was too much for Ninon, who

was more modest in her ambitions, and she fled frightened.

The Marquis de Villarceaux received her with open arms at his chateau some distance from Paris, and that was her home for three years. There were loud protests at this desertion from her coterie of friends, and numerous dark threats were uttered against the gallant Marquis who had thus captured the queen of the "Birds," but Ninon explained her reason in such a plausible manner that their complaints subsided into good-natured growls. She hoped to prevent a political conflagration emanating from her social circle by scattering the firebrands, and she succeeded admirably. The Marquis was constantly with her, permitting nobody to intervene between them, and provided her with a perpetual round of amusements that made the time pass very quickly. Moreover, she was faithful to the Marquis, so wonderful a circumstance that her friend and admirer wrote an elegy upon that circumstance, in which he draws a picture of the pleasures of the ancients in ruralizing, but reproaches Ninon for indulging in a passion for so long a period to the detriment of her other friends and admirers. But Ninon was happy in attaining the summit of her desire, which was to defeat Madame Scarron, her rival in the affections of the Marquis, keeping the latter by her side for three whole years as has already been said.

However delighted Ninon may have been with this arrangement, the Marquis, himself, did not repose upon a bed of roses. The jealousy of the "Birds" gave him no respite, he being obliged in honor to respond to their demands for an explanation of his conduct in carrying off their leader, generally insisting upon the so-called field of honor as the most appropriate place for giving a satisfactory answer. They even invaded his premises until they forced him to make them some concessions in the way of permission to see the object of their admiration, and to share in her society. The Marquis was proud of his conquest, the very idea of a three years' tête à tête with the most volatile heart in France being sufficient to justify him in boast-

ing of his prowess, but whenever he ventured to do so, a champion on the part of Ninon always stood ready to make him either eat his words or fight to maintain them.

Madame Scarron, whom he so basely deserted for the superior charms of her friend Ninon, often gave him a bad quarter of an hour. When she became the mistress of the king and, as Madame de Maintenon, really held the reins of power, visions of the Bastille thronged his brain. He knew perfectly well that he had scorned the charms of Madame Scarron, who believed them irresistible, and that he deserved whatever punishment she might inflict upon him. She might have procured a lettered cachet, had him immured in a dungeon or his head removed from his shoulders as easily as order a dinner, but she did nothing to gratify a spirit of revenge, utterly ignoring his existence.

Added to these trifling circumstances, trifling in comparison with what follows, was the furious jealousy of his wife, Madame la Marquise. She was violently angry and did not conceal her hatred for the woman who had stolen her husband's affections. The Marquise was a trifle vulgar and common in her manner of manifesting her displeasure, but the Marquis, a very polite and affable gentleman, did not pay the slightest attention to his wife's daily recriminations, but continued to amuse himself with the charming Ninon.

Under such circumstances each was compelled to have a separate social circle, the Marquis entertaining his friends with the adorable Ninon as the center of attraction, and Madame la Marquise doing her best to offer counter attractions. Somehow, Ninon drew around her all the most desirable part is among the flower of the nobility and wits, leaving the social circle managed by la Marquise to languish for want of stamina. It was a constant source of annoyance to the Marquise to see her rival's entertainments so much in repute, and her own so poorly attended, and she was at her wits' end to devise something that would give them éclat. One of her methods, and an impromptu scene at one of her drawing rooms, will serve to show the

reason why Madame la Marquise was not in good repute and why she could not attract the élite of Paris to her entertainments.

La Marquise was a very vain, moreover, a very ignorant woman, a "nouvelle riche" in fact, or what might be termed in modern parlance "shoddy," without tact, sense, or savoir faire. One day at a grand reception, some of her guests desired to see her young son, of whom she was very proud, and of whose talents and virtues she was always boasting. He was sent for and came into the presence accompanied by his tutor, an Italian savant who never left his side. From praising his beauty of person, they passed to his mental qualities. Madame la Marquise, enchanted at the caresses her son was receiving and aiming to create a sensation by showing off his learning, took it into her head to have his tutor put him through an examination in history.

"Interrogate my son upon some of his recent lessons in history," said she to the tutor, who was not at all loath to show his own attainments by the brilliancy of his pupil.

"Come, now, Monsieur le Marquis," said the tutor with alacrity, "Quem habuit successorem Belus rex Assiriorum?" ("Whom did Belus, king of the Assyrians, have for successor?")

It so happened that the tutor had taught the boy to pronounce the Latin language after the Italian fashion. Wherefore, when the lad answered "Ninum," who was really the successor of Belus, king of the Assyrians, he pronounced the last two letters "um" like the French nasal "on," which gave the name of the Assyrian king the same sound as that of Ninon de l'Enclos, the terrible bête noir of the jealous Marquise. This was enough to set her off into a spasm of fury against the luckless tutor, who could not understand why he should be so berated over a simple question and its correct answer. The Marquise not understanding Latin,

and guided only by the sound of the answer, which was similar to the name of her hated rival, jumped at the conclusion that he was answering some question about Ninon de l'Enclos.

"You are giving my son a fine education," she snapped out before all her guests, "by entertaining him with the follies of his father. From the answer of the young Marquis, I judge of the impertinence of your question. Go, leave my sight, and never enter it again."

The unfortunate tutor vainly protested that he did not comprehend her anger, that he meant no affront, that there was no other answer to be made than "Ninum," unfortunately, again pronouncing the word "Ninon," which nearly sent the lady into a fit of apoplexy with rage at hearing the tabooed name repeated in her presence. The incensed woman carried the scene to a ridiculous point, refusing to listen to reason or explanation.

"No, he said 'Ninon,' and Ninon it was."

The story spread all over Paris, and when it reached Ninon, she laughed immoderately, her friends dubbing her "The successor of Belus." Ninon told Molière the ridiculous story, and he turned it to profit in one of his comedies in the character of Countess d'Escarbagnas.

At the expiration of three years, peace had come to France after a fashion, the cabals were not so frequent and the rivalry between the factions not so bitter. Whatever differences there had been were patched up or smoothed over. Ninon's return to the house in the Rue des Tournelles was hailed with joy by her "Birds," who received her as one returned from the dead. Saint-Evremond composed an elegy beginning with these lines:

Chère Philis, qu'êtes vous devenues?
Cet enchanteur qui vous a retenue
Depuis trois ans par un charme nouveau
Vous retient-il en quelque vieux château?