

Chapter XIII – The Marquis de Sévigné

It has been attempted to cast odium upon the memory of Mademoiselle de l'Enclos because of her connection with the second Marquis de Sévigné, son of the celebrated Madame de Sévigné, whose letters have been read far and wide by those who fancy they can find something in them with reference to the morals and practices of the court of Versailles during her period.

The Marquis de Sévigné, by a vitiated taste quite natural in men of weak powers, had failed to discern a handsome woman, spirited, perhaps of too jealous a nature or disposition to be esteemed, the proper sentiments, or sentiments strong enough to retain his affections. He implored Ninon to aid him in preserving her affections and to teach him how to secure her love. Ninon undertook to give him instructions in the art of captivating women's hearts, to show him the nature of love and its operations, and to give him an insight into the nature of women. The Marquis profited by these lessons to fall in love with Ninon, finding her a thousand times more charming than his actress or his princess. Madame de Sévigné's letter, referring to the love of her son for Ninon, testifies by telling him plainly "Ninon spoiled your father," that this passion was not so much unknown to her as it was a matter of indifference.

The young Chevalier de Vassé often gave brilliant receptions in honor of Ninon at Saint Cloud, which the Marquis de Sévigné always attended as the mutual friend of both. De Vassé was well acquainted with Ninon's peculiarities, and knew that the gallantry of such a man as de Sévigné was a feeble means of retaining the affections of a heart that was the slave of nothing but its own fugitive desires. But he was a man devoted to his friends and, being Epicurean in his philosophy, he did not attempt to interfere with the affection he perceived growing between Ninon and his friend. It never occurred to the Marquis that he was guilty of a betrayal of friendship by paying court to Ninon, and the latter took the Marquis' atten-

tions as a matter of course, without considering the ingratitude of her conduct. She rather flattered herself at having been sufficiently attractive to capture a man of de Sévigné's family distinction. She had captured the heart of de Sévigné, the father, and had received so many animadversions upon her conduct from Madame de Sévigné, that it afforded her great pleasure to "spoil" the son as she had the father.

But her satisfaction was short-lived, for she had the chagrin to learn soon after her conquest that de Sévigné had perished on the field of honor at the hands of Chevalier d'Albret. Her sorrow was real, of course, but the fire lighted by the senses is small and not enduring, and when the occasion arises regret is not eternalized; besides there were others waiting with impatience. His successful rival out of the way, de Vassé supposed he had a clear field, but he did not attain his expected happiness. He was no longer pleasing to Ninon, and she did not hesitate to make him understand that he could never hope to win her heart. According to her philosophy there is nothing so shameful in a tender friendship as the art of dissimulation.

As has been said, much odium has been cast upon Mademoiselle de l'Enclos in this de Sévigné matter. It all grew out of the dislike of Madame de Sévigné for a woman who attracted even her own husband and son from her side and heart, and for whom her dearest friends professed the most intimate attachment. Madame de Grignan, the proud, haughty daughter of the house of de Sévigné, did not scruple to array herself on the side of Mademoiselle de l'Enclos with Madame de Coulanges, another bright star among the noble and respectable families of France.

"Women have the privilege of being weak," says Madame de Sévigné, "and they make use of that privilege without scruple."

Women had never, before the time of Ninon, exercised their rights of weakness to such an unlimited extent. There was neither honor

nor honesty to be found among them. They were common to every man who attracted their fancy, without regard to fidelity to any one in particular. The seed sown by the infamous Catherine de Medici, the utter depravity of the court of Charles IX, and the profligacy of Henry IV, bore an astonishing supply of bitter fruit. The love of pleasure had, so to speak, carried every woman off her feet, and there was no limit to their abuses. Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, while devoting herself to a life of pleasure, followed certain philosophical rules and regulations, which removed from the unrestrained freedom of the times the stigma of commonness, and conferred something of respectability upon practices that nowadays would be considered horribly immoral, but which then were regarded as nothing uncommon, nay, were legitimate and proper. The cavaliers cut one another's throats for the love of God and in the cause of religion, and the women encouraged the arts, sciences, literature, and the drama, by conferring upon talent, wit, genius and merit, favors which were deemed conducive as encouragements to the growth of intellect and spirituality.

Ninon was affected by the spirit of the times, and being a woman, it was impossible for her to resist desire when aided by philosophy and force of example. Her intimacy with de Sévigné grew out of her attempt to teach a young, vigorous, passionate man how to gain the love of a cold-blooded, vain and conceited woman. Her letters will show the various stages of her desires, as she went along vainly struggling to beat something like comprehension into the dull brain of a clod, who could not understand the simplest principle of love, or the smallest point in the female character. At last she resolved to use an argument that was convincing with the brightest minds with whom she had ever dealt, that is, the power of her own love, and if the Marquis had lived, perhaps he might have become an ornament to society and an honor to his family.

To do this, however, she violated her compact with de Vassé, betrayed his confidence

and opened the way for the animadversions of Madame de Sévigné. At that time de Sévigné was in love with an actress, Mademoiselle Champmêlé, but desired to withdraw his affections, or rather transfer them to a higher object, a countess, or a princess, as the reader may infer from his mother's hints in one of her letters to be given hereafter. To Ninon, therefore, he went for instruction and advice, as to the best course to pursue to get rid of one love and on with a new. Madame de Sévigné and Madame de La Fayette vainly implored him to avoid Ninon as he would the pest. The more they prayed and entreated, the closer he came to Ninon until she became his ideal. Ninon herself, was captivated by his pleasant conversation, agreeable manners and seductive traits. She knew that he had had a love affair with Champmêlé the actress, and when she began to obtain an ascendancy over his mind, she wormed out of him all the letters he had ever received from the comedienne. Some say it was jealousy on Ninon's part, but any one who reads her letters to de Sévigné will see between the lines a disposition on his part to wander away after a new charmer. Others, however, say that she intended to send them to the Marquis de Tonnerre, whom the actress had betrayed for de Sévigné.

But Madame de Sévigné, to whom her son had confessed his folly in giving up the letters, perhaps fearing to be embroiled in a disgraceful duel over an actress, made him blush at his cruel sacrifice of a woman who loved him, and made him understand that even in dishonesty there were certain rules of honesty to be observed. She worked upon his mind until he felt that he had committed a dishonorable act, and when he had reached that point it was easy to get the letters away from Ninon partly by artifice, partly by force. Madame de Sévigné tells the story in a letter to her daughter, Madame de Grignan:

"Elle (Ninon) voulut l'autre jour lui faire donner des lettres de la comedienne (Champmêlé); il les lui donna; elle en était jalouse; elle voulait les donner à un amant de la princesse, afin de lui faire donner quelque coups de baudrier. Il me le vint dire: je lui fis voir

que c'était une infamie de couper ainsi la gorge à une petite créature pour l'avoir aimer; je représentai qu'elle n'avait point sacrifié ses lettres, comme on voulait lui faire croire pour l'animer. Il entra dans mes raisons; il courut chez Ninon, et moitié par adresse, et moitié par force, il retira les lettres de cette pauvre diablesse."

It was easy for a doting mother like Madame de Sévigné to credit everything her son manufactured for her delectation. The dramatic incident of de Sévigné taking letters from Ninon de l'Enclos partly by ingenuity and partly by force, resembled his tale that he had left Ninon, and that he did not care for her, while all the time they were inseparable. He was truly a lover of Penelope, the bow of Ulysses having betrayed his weakness.

"The malady of his soul," says his mother, "afflicted his body. He thought himself like

the good Esos; he would have himself boiled in a caldron with aromatic herbs to restore his vigor."

But Ninon's opinion of him was somewhat different. She lamented his untimely end, but did not hesitate to express her views.

"He was a man beyond definition," was her panegyric. "He possessed a soul of pulp, a body of wet paper, and a heart of pumpkin fricasseed in snow."

She finally became ashamed of ever having loved him, and insisted that they were never more than brother and sister. She tried to make something out of him by exposing all the secrets of the female heart, and initiating him in the mysteries of human love, but as she said, "His heart was a pumpkin fricasseed in snow."