

Chapter XIV – A Family Tragedy

Some of Ninon's engagements, following upon one another in quick succession, were the cause of an unusual disagreement, not to say quarrel, between two rivals in her affections. A Marshal of France, d'Estrées and the celebrated Abbé Deffiat disputed the right of parentage, the dispute waxing warm because both contended for the honor and could not see any way out of their difficulty, neither consenting to make the slightest concession. Ninon, however, calmed the tempest by suggesting a way out of the difficulty through the hazard of the dice. Luck or good fortune for the waif declared in favor of the warrior, who made a better guardian than the Abbé could possibly have done, and brought him greater happiness.

Ninon surrendered all her maternal rights in the child to the worthy Marshal, who became in reality a tender and affectionate father to the waif, cared for him tenderly, and raised him up to a good position in life. He placed him in the marine service, where, as the Chevalier de la Bossière, he reached the grade of captain of a vessel, and died at an advanced age respected by his brother officers and by all who knew him. He inherited some of the talents of his mother, particularly music, in which he was remarkably proficient. His apartments at Toulon, where he was stationed, were crowded with musical instruments and the works of the greatest masters. All the musicians traveling back and forth between Italy and France made his house their headquarters. The Chevalier accorded them a generous welcome on all occasions; the only return demanded was an exhibition of their proficiency in instrumental music.

The happiness of this son solaced Ninon for his unfortunate birth, and it would have been happy for her had she never had a second. But her profound love for the Chevalier de Gersay overcame any scruples that might have arisen in her mind against again yielding to the maternal instinct, and another son came to her, one who

was destined to meet a most horrible fate and cause her the most exquisite mental torture.

This de Gersay, who was famous for the temerity of his passion for the queen, Anne of Austria, a fact he announced from the rooftops of Paris in his delirium, was as happy as a king over the boy that came to him so unexpectedly, and lavished upon him the most extravagant affection. He took him to his heart and trained him up in all the accomplishments taught those of the highest rank and most noble blood. The boy grew up and received the name of Chevalier de Villiers, becoming a credit to his father.

His mother was beyond sixty years of age when de Villiers began to enter society, and her beauty was still remarkable, according to the chronicles of the times and the allusions made to it in the current literature. She was as attractive in her appearance, and as lovable as at twenty years of age, few, even among the younger habitués of her drawing rooms, being able to resist the charms of her person. Her house was thronged with the élite of French society, young men of noble families being designedly sent into her society to acquire taste, grace, and polish which they were unable to acquire elsewhere. Ninon possessed a singular genius for inspiring men with high and noble sentiments, and her schooling in the art of etiquette was marvelous in its details and perfection. Her power was practically a repetition of the history of the Empress Theodora, whose happy admirers and intimates could be distinguished from all others by their exquisite politeness, culture, finish and social polish. It was the same in Ninon's school, the graduates of which occupied the highest rank in letters, society, statesmanship, and military genius.

De Gersay intending his son to fill a high position in society and public honors, sent him to this school, where he was received and put upon the same footing as other youth of high birth, and was duly trained with them in all

the arts and accomplishments of refined society. The young man was not aware of his parentage, de Gersay having extracted a solemn promise from Mademoiselle de l'Enclos that she would never divulge the secret of the youth's birth without his father's express consent – a promise which resulted in the most disastrous consequences.

Ninon, as mother of this handsome youth, admired him, and manifested a tenderness which he misunderstood for the emotion of love, Ninon, herself never contemplating such a fatality, and ended by becoming enamored of his own mother. Ninon thought nothing of his passion, believing that it would soon pass away, but it increased in intensity, becoming a violent flame, which finally proved irresistible, forcing the youth to fall at his mother's feet, and pour forth his passion in the most extravagant language.

Alarmed at this condition of her son's heart, Ninon withdrew from his society, refusing to admit him to her presence. Although the Chevalier was an impetuous wooer, he was dismayed by the loss of his innamorata, and begged for the privilege of seeing her, promising solemnly never to repeat his declaration of love. Ninon was deceived by his professions and re-admitted him to her society. Insensibly, however, perhaps in despite of his struggle to overcome his amorous propensities, the Chevalier violated the conditions of the truce. Ninon, on the watch for a repetition of his former manifestations, quickly perceived the return of a love so abhorrent to nature. His sighs, glances, sadness when in her presence, were signs to her of a passion that she would be compelled to subdue with a strong, ruthless hand.

"Raise your eyes to that clock," she said to him one day, "and mark the passing of time. Rash boy, it is sixty-five years since I came into the world. Does it become me to listen to a passion like love? Is it possible at my age to love or be loved? Enter within yourself, Chevalier, and see how ridiculous are your desires and those you would arouse in me."

All Ninon's remonstrances, however, tended only to increase the desires that burned in the young man's breast. His mother's tears, which now began to flow, were regarded by the youth as trophies of success.

"What, tears?" he exclaimed, "you shed tears for me? Are they wrung from your heart by pity, by tenderness? Ah, am I to be blessed?"

"This is terrible," she replied, "it is insanity. Leave me, and do not poison the remainder of a life which I detest."

"What language is this?" exclaimed the Chevalier. "What poison can the sweetness of making still another one happy instill into the loveliest life? Is this the tender and philosophic Ninon? Has she not raised between us that shadow of virtue that makes her sex adorable? What chimeras have changed your heart? Shall I tell you? You carry your cruelty to the extent of fighting against yourself, resisting your own desires. I have seen in your eyes a hundred times less resistance than you now set against me. And these tears, which my condition has drawn from your eyes, tell me, are they shed through indifference or hate? Are you ashamed to avow a sensibility which honors humanity?"

"Cease, Chevalier," said Ninon, raising her hand in protest, "the right to claim my liveliest friendship rested with you. I thought you worthy of it. That is the cause of the friendly looks, which you have mistaken for others of greater meaning, and it is also the cause of the tears I shed. Do not flatter yourself that you have inspired me with the passion of love. I can see too plainly that your desires are the effect of a passing presumption. Come now, you shall know my heart, and it should destroy all hope for you. It will go so far as to hate you, if you repeat your protestations of blind tenderness. I do not care to understand you. Leave me, to regret the favors you have so badly interpreted."

When Ninon learned that her son was plunged into despair and fury on account of her rejection of his love, her heart was torn with sorrow, and she regretted that she had not at first told him the secret of his birth, but her

solemn promise to de Gersay had stood in her way. She determined now to remedy the evil and she therefore applied to de Gersay to relieve her from her promise. De Gersay advised her to communicate the truth to her son as soon as possible to prevent a catastrophe, which he prophesied was liable to happen when least expected. She accordingly wrote the Chevalier that at a certain time she would be at her house in the Saint Antoine suburb, and prayed him to meet her there. The impassioned Chevalier, expecting nothing less than the gratification of his desires, prepared him with extreme care and flew to the assignation. He was disconcerted, however, by finding Ninon despondent and sad, instead of smiling and joyful with anticipation. However, he cast himself at her feet, seized her hand and covered it with tears and kisses.

“Unfortunate,” cried Ninon submitting to his embraces, “there are destinies beyond human prudence to direct. What have I not attempted to do to calm your agitated spirit? What mystery do you force me to unfold?”

“Ah, you are about to deceive me again,” interrupted the Chevalier, “I do not perceive in your eyes the love I had the right to expect. I recognize in your obscure language an injustice you are about to commit; you hope to cure me of my love, but disabuse yourself of that fancy; the cruel triumph you seek to win is beyond the united strength of both of us, above any imaginable skill, beyond the power of reason itself. It seems to listen to nothing but its own intoxication, and at the same time rush to the last extremity.”

“Stop,” exclaimed Ninon, indignant at this unreasoning folly, “this horrible love shall not reach beyond the most sacred duties. Stop, I tell you, monster that you are, and shudder with dismay. Can love flourish where horror fills the soul? Do you know who you are and who I am? The lover you are pursuing – “

“Well! That lover?” demanded the Chevalier.

“Is your mother,” replied Ninon; “you owe me your birth. It is my son who sighs at my feet, who talks to me of love. What sentiments

do you think you have inspired me with? Monsieur de Gersay, your father, through an excess of affection for you, wished you to remain ignorant of your birth. Ah, my son, by what fatality have you compelled me to reveal this secret? You know to what degree of opprobrium the prejudiced have put one of your birth, wherefore it was necessary to conceal it from your delicacy of mind, but you would not have it so. Know me as your mother, oh, my son, and pardon me for having given you life.”

Ninon burst into a flood of tears and pressed her son to her heart, but he seemed to be crushed by the revelations he heard. Pale, trembling, nerveless, he dared not pronounce the sweet name of mother, for his soul was filled with horror at his inability to realize the relationship sufficiently to destroy the burning passion he felt for her person. He cast one long look into her eyes, bent them upon the ground, arose with a deep sigh and fled. A garden offered him a refuge, and there, in a thick clump of bushes, he drew his sword and without a moment’s hesitation fell upon it, to sink down dying.

Ninon had followed him dreading some awful calamity, and there, in the dim light of the stars, she found her son weltering in his blood, shed by his own hand for love of her. His dying eyes, which he turned toward her, still spoke ardent love, and he expired while endeavoring to utter words of endearment.

Le Sage, in the romance of *Gil Blas*, has painted this horrible catastrophe of Ninon de l’Enclos in the characters of the old woman Inisilla de Cantarilla, and the youth Don Valerio de Luna. The incident is similar to that which happened to Oedipus, the Theban who tore out his eyes after discovering that in marrying Jocasta, the queen, he had married his own mother. Le Sage’s hero, however, mourns because he had not been able to commit the crime, which gives the case of Ninon’s son a similar tinge, his self-immolation being due, not to the horror of having indulged in criminal love for his own mother, but to the regret at not having been able to accomplish his purpose.