

Chapter XV – Her Bohemian Environments

The daily and nightly doings at Ninon's house in the Rue des Tournelles, if there is anything of a similar character in modern society that can be compared to them, might be faintly represented by our Bohemian circles, where good cheer, good fellowship, and freedom from restraint are supposed to reign. There are, indeed, numerous clubs at the present day styled "Bohemian," but except so far as the tendency to relaxation appears upon the surface, they possess very few of the characteristics of that society of "Birds" that assembled around Mademoiselle de l'Enclos. They put aside all conventional restraint, and the mental metal of those choice spirits clashed and evolved brilliant sparks, bright rays of light, the luster of which still glitters after a lapse of more than two centuries.

Personally, Ninon was an enemy of pedantry in every form, demanding of her followers originality at all times on penalty of banishment from her circle. The great writer, Mynard, once related with tears in his eyes that his daughter, who afterward became the Countess de Feuquières, had no memory, whereat Ninon laughed him out of his sorrow:

"You are too happy in having a daughter who has no memory; she will not be able to make citations."

That her society was sought by very good men, is evidenced by the grave theologians who found her companionship pleasant, perhaps salutary. A celebrated Jesuit who did not scruple to find entertainment in her social circle, undertook to combat her philosophy and show her the truth from his point of view, but she came so near converting him to her tenets that he abandoned the contest remarking with a laugh:

"Well, well, Mademoiselle, while waiting to be convinced that you are in error, offer up to God your unbelief." Rousseau has converted this incident into an epigram.

The grave and learned clergy of Port Royal also undertook the labor of converting her, but their labor was in vain.

"You know," she told Fontenelle, "what use I make of my body? Well, then, it would be easier for me to obtain a good price for my soul, for the Jansenists and Molinists are engaged in a competition of bidding for it."

She was not bigoted in the least, as the following incident will show: One of her friends refused to send for a priest when in extremis, but Ninon brought one to his bedside, and as the clergyman, knowing the skepticism of the dying sinner, hesitated to exercise his functions, she encouraged him to do his duty:

"Do your duty, sir," she said, "I assure you that although our friend can argue, he knows no more about the truth than you and I."

The key to Mademoiselle de l'Enclos' character is to be found in her toleration and liberality. Utterly unselfish, she had no thoughts beyond the comfort and happiness of her friends. For them she sacrificed her person, an astounding sacrifice in a woman, one for which a multitude have suffered martyrdom for refusing to make, and are cited as models of virtue to be followed. Yet, notwithstanding her strange misapplication or perversion of what the world calls "female honor," her world had nothing but the most profound respect and admiration for her. It requires an extremely delicate pencil to sketch such a character, and even then, a hundred trials might result in failing to seize upon its most vivid lights and shades and bring out its best points.

Standing out clearly defined through her whole life was a noble soul that never stooped to anything common, low, debasing or vulgar. Brought up from infancy in the society of men, taught to consider them as her companions and equals, and treated by them as one of themselves, she acquired a grace and a polish that made her society desired by the proudest ladies of the court. There is no one in the annals of the

nations of the Earth that can be compared to her. The Aspasia of Pericles has been regarded by some as a sort of prototype, but Aspasia was a common woman of the town; her thoughts were devoted to the aggrandizement of one man, her love affairs were bestowed upon an open market. On the contrary, Mademoiselle de l'Enclos never bestowed her favors upon any but one she could ever after regard as an earnest, unselfish friend. Their friendship was a source of delight to her, and she was Epicurean in the enjoyment of everything that goes with friendship.

Saint-Evremond likens her to Leontium, the Athenian woman, celebrated for her philosophy and for having dared to write a book against the great Theophrastus, a literary venture that may have been the reason why Saint-Evremond gave Ninon the title. Ninon's heart was weak, it is true, but she had early learned those philosophical principles which drew her senses away from that portion of her soul, and her environments were those most conducive to the cultivation of the senses which are so easily led away into seductive paths. But however far her love of pleasure may have led her, her philosophical ideas and practices did not succeed in destroying or even weakening any other virtue. "The smallest fault of gallant women," says de la Rochefoucauld, "is their gallantry."

The distinguished Abbé Châteauneuf expresses a trait in her character that drew to her side the most distinguished men of the period.

"She reserved all her esteem, all her confidence for friendship, which she always regarded as a respectable liaison," says the Abbé, "and to maintain that friendship she permitted no diminution or relaxation."

In other words, she was constant and true, without whims or caprice. The Comte de Segur, in his work on "Women, their Condition and Influence in Society," says, "While Ninon de l'Enclos was fostering and patronizing genius, and giving it opportunities to expand, Madame de Sévigné was at the head of a cabal in opposition to genius, unless it was measured upon

her own standard. In her self-love, she wrought against Racine and sought to diminish the literary luster of Fléchier. But with all her ability, Madame de Sévigné possessed very little genius or tact, and her lack of discrimination is apparent in the fact that none of her protégés ever reached any distinction. Moreover, her virtues must have been of an appalling character, since they were not strong enough to save her husband and son from falling into the clutches of 'That horrid woman,' referring to Ninon."

Ninon certainly understood, men; she divined them at the first glance and provided for their bodily and intellectual wants. If they were deemed worthy of her favors, she bestowed them freely, and out of one animal desire gratified, there were created a thousand intellectual aspirations. She understood clearly that man cannot be all animal or all spiritual, and that the attempt to divert nature from its duality of being was to wreck humanity and make of man neither fish, flesh nor fowl. Her constant prayer in her younger days, for the truth of which Voltaire vouches, was:

"Mon Dieu, faites de moi un honnête homme, et n' en faites jamais une honnête femme." ("My God, make me an honest man, but never an honest woman.")

Count Segur, in his book already referred to, has this to say further concerning Ninon:

"Ninon shone under the reign of Louis XIV like a graceful plant in its proper soil. Splendor seemed to be her element. That Ninon might appear in the sphere that became her, it was necessary that Turenne and Condé should sigh at her feet, that Voltaire should receive from her his first lessons, in a word, that in her illustrious cabinet, glory and genius should be seen sporting with love and the graces."

Had it not been for the influence of Ninon de l'Enclos – there are many who claim it as the truth – the somber tinge, the veil of gloominess and hypocritical austerity which surrounded Madame de Maintenon and her court, would have wrecked the intellects of the most illustrious and brightest men in France, in war, literature, science, and statesmanship. Madame

de Maintenon resisted that influence but the Rue des Tournelles strove against Saint Cyr. The world fluctuated between these two systems established by women, both of them, shall it be said, courtesans? The legality and morality of our modern common law marriages, and the ease and frequency of trivial divorces forbid it. Ninon prevailed, however, and not only governed hearts but souls. The difference between the two courts was: the royal salon was thronged with women of the most infamous character who had nothing but their infamy to bestow, while the drawing rooms of Ninon de l'Enclos were crowded with men almost exclusively, and men of wit and genius.

The moral that the majority of writers draw from the three courts that occupied society at that time, the Rue des Tournelles, Madame de Sévigné, and Versailles, is, that men demand human nature and will have it in preference to abnormal goodness, and female debauchery. Ninon never hesitated to declaim against the fictitious beauty that pretended to inculcate virtue and morality while secretly engaged in the most corrupt practices, but Molière came with his *Précieuses Ridicules* and pulverized the enemies of human nature. Ninon did not know Molière personally at that time, but she was so loud in his praise for covering her gross imitators with confusion, that Bachaumont and Chapelle, two of her intimate friends, ventured to introduce the young dramatist into her society. The father of this Bachaumont, who was a twin, said of him, "My son who is only half a man, wants to do as if he were a whole one." Though only "half a man" and extremely feeble and delicate, he became a voluptuary according to the ideas of Chapelle, and by devoting himself to the doctrines of Epicurus, he managed to live until eighty years of age. Chapelle was a drunkard as has been intimated in a preceding chapter, and although he loved Ninon passionately, she steadily refused to favor him.

Molière and Ninon were mutually attracted, each recognizing in the other not only a kindred spirit, but also something not apparent on the surface. Nature had given them the same eyes,

and they saw men and things from the same viewpoint. Molière was destined to enlighten his age by his pen, and Ninon through her wise counsel and sage reflections. In speaking of Molière to Saint-Evremond, she declared with fervor:

"I thank God every night for finding me a man of his spirit, and I pray Him every morning to preserve him from the follies of the heart."

There was a great opposition to Molière's comedy "*Tartuffe*." It created a sensation in society, and neither Louis XIV, the prelates of the kingdom and the Roman legate, were strong enough to withstand the torrents of invectives that came from those who were unmasked in the play. They succeeded in having it interdicted, and the comedy was on the point of being suppressed altogether, when Molière took it to Ninon, read it over to her and asked her opinion as to what had better be done. With her keen sense of the ridiculous, and her knowledge of character, Ninon went over the play with Molière to such good purpose that the edict of suppression was withdrawn, the opponents of the comedy finding themselves in a position where they could no longer take exceptions without confessing the truth of the innuendoes.

When the comedy was nearly completed, Molière began trying to think of a name to give the main character in the play, who is an imposter. One day while at dinner with the Papal Nuncio, he noticed two ecclesiastics, whose air of pretended mortification fairly represented the character he had depicted in the play. While considering them closely, a peddler came along with truffles to sell. One of the pious ecclesiastics who knew very little Italian, pricked up his ears at the word truffles, which seemed to have a familiar sound Suddenly coming out of his devout silence, he selected several of the finest of the truffles, and holding them out to the Nuncio, exclaimed with a laugh, "*Tartuffoli, Tartuffoli, signor Nuncio!*" imagining that he was displaying his knowledge of the Italian language by calling out "*Truffles, truffles, signor Nuncio,*" whereas, what he did say was "*Hyp-*

ocrites, hypocrites, Signor Nuncio.” Molière who was always a close and keen observer of everything that transpired around him, seized upon the name “Tartuffe” as suitable to the hypocritical imposter in his comedy.

Ninon’s brilliancy was so animated, particularly at table, that she was said to be intoxicated at the soup, although she rarely drank anything but water. Her table was always surrounded by the wittiest of her friends, and her own flashes kept their spirits up to the highest point. The charm of her conversation was equal to the draughts of Nepenthe, which Helen lavished upon her guests, according to Homer, to charm and enchant them.

One story told about Ninon is not to her credit if true, and it is disputed. A great preacher arose in France, the “Eagle of the Pulpit,” as he was called, or “The great Pan,” as Madame de Sévigné loved to designate him. His renown for eloquence and piety reached Ninon’s ears and she conceived a scheme, so it is said, to bring this great orator to her feet. She had held in her chains from time to time, all the heroes, and illustrious men of France, and she considered Père Bourdaloue worthy of a place on the list. She accordingly arrayed herself in her most fascinating costume, feigned illness and sent for

him. But Père Bourdaloue was not a man to be captivated by any woman, and, moreover, he was a man too deeply versed in human perversity to be easily deceived. He came at her request, however, and to her question as to her condition he answered, “I perceive that your malady exists only in your heart and mind; as to your body, it appears to me to be in perfect health. I pray the great physician of souls, that he will heal you.” Saying which he left her without ceremony.

The story is probably untrue and grew out of a song of the times, to ridicule the attempts of numerous preachers to convert Ninon from her way of living. They frequented her social receptions but those were always public, as she never trusted herself to any one without the knowledge and presence of some of her “Birds,” taking that precaution for her own safety and to avoid any appearance of partiality. The song referred to, composed by some unknown scribe begins as follows:

“Ninon passe les jours au jeu:
Cours où l’amour to porte;
Le prédicateur qui t’ exhorte,
S’il était au coin de ton feu,
Te parlerait d’un autre sorte.”