Chapter XVI – A Remarkable Old Age

When Ninon had reached the age of sixty-five years, there were those among the beauties of the royal court, who thought she ought to retire from society and make way for them, but there appeared to be no diminution of her capacity for pleasure, no weakening of her powers of attraction. The legend of the Noctambule, or the little black man, who appeared to Ninon when she was at the age of twenty years, and promised her perpetual beauty and the conquest of all hearts, was revived, and there was enough probability in it to justify a strong belief in the story. Indeed, the Abbé Servien spread it about again when Ninon was seventy years of age, and even then there were few who disputed the mysterious gift as Ninon showed little change.

As old age approached, Ninon ceased to be regarded with that familiarity shown her by her intimates in her younger days, and a respect and admiration took its place. She was no longer "Ninon," but "Mademoiselle de l'Enclos." Her social circle widened, and instead of being limited to men exclusively, ladies eagerly took advantage of the privilege accorded them to frequent the charming circle. That circle certainly became celebrated. The beautiful woman had lived the life of an earnest Epicurean in her own way, regardless of society's conventionalities, and had apparently demonstrated that her way was the best. She had certainly attained a long life, and what was more to the purpose she had preserved her beauty and the attractions of her person were as strong as when she was in her prime. Reason enough why the women of the age thronged her apartments to learn the secret of her life. Moreover, her long and intimate associations with the most remarkable men of the century had not failed to impart to her, in addition to her exquisite femininity, the wisdom of a sage and the polish of a man of the world.

Madame de La Fayette, that "rich field so fertile in fruits," as Ninon said of her, and Madame de la Sablière, "a lovely garden enameled with eye-charming flowers," another of Ninon's descriptive metaphors, passed as many hours as they could in her society with the illustrious Duke de la Rochefoucauld, who, up to the time of his death honored Ninon with his constant friendship and his devoted esteem. Even Madame de Sévigné put aside her envy and jealousy and never wearied of the pleasure of listening to the conversation of this wise beauty, in company with her haughty daughter, Madame de Grignan, Madame de Coulanges, Madame de Torp, and, strange to say, the Duchess de Bouillon.

Her friends watched over her health with the tenderest care and affection, and even her slightest indisposition brought them around her with expressions of the deepest solicitude. They dreaded losing her, for having had her so long among them, they hoped to keep her always, and they did, practically, for she outlived the most of them. As proof of the anxiety of her friends and the delight they experienced at her recovery from the slightest ailment, one illustration will suffice:

On one occasion she had withdrawn from her friends for a single evening, pleading indisposition. The next evening she reappeared and her return was celebrated by an original poem written by no less a personage than the Abbé Regnier-Desmarais, who read it to the friends assembled around her chair:

"Clusine qui dans tous les temps
Eut de tous les honnêtes gens
L'amour et l'estime en partage ;
Qui toujours pleine de bon sens
Sut de chaque saison de l'âge
Faire a propos un juste usage;
Qui daps son entretien, dont on fut
enchanté
Sut faire un aimable alliage
De l'agréable badinage,
Avec la politesse et la solidité,

Et que le ciel doua d'un esprit droit et sage,
Toujours d' intelligence avec la verité,
Clusine est, grâce au ciel, en parfaite santé.

Such a poem would not be accorded much praise nowadays, but the hearts of her friends regarded the sentiments more than the polish, as a substantial translation into English will serve to show appeared in the lines:

Clusine who from our earliest ken
Had from all good and honest men
Love and esteem a generous share;
Who knew so well the season when
Her heritage of sense so rare
To use with justice and with care;
Who in her discourse, friends enchanted
all around,
Could fashion out of playful ware
An alloy of enduring wear,
Good breeding and with solid ground,
A heavenly spirit wise and fair,
With truth and intellect profound,
Clusine, thanks be to Heaven, her perfect
health has found.

Her salon was open to her friends in general from five o'clock in the evening until nine, at which hour she begged them to permit her to retire and gain strength for the morrow. In winter she occupied a large apartment decorated with portraits of her dearest male and female friends, and numerous paintings by celebrated artists. In summer, she occupied an apartment that overlooked the boulevard, its walls frescoed with magnificent sketches from the life of Psyche. In one or the other of these salons, she gave her friends four hours every evening, after that retiring to rest or amusing herself with a few intimates. Her friendship finds an apt illustration in the case of the Comte de Charleval. He was always delicate and in feeble health, and Ninon when he became her admirer, in his youth, resolved to prolong his life through the application of the Epicurean philosophy. De Marville, speaking of the Count, whom no one imagined would survive to middle age, says, "Nature, which gave him so delicate a body in such perfect form, also gave him a delicate and perfect intelligence." This frail and delicate invalid lived, however, until the age of eighty years, and was always grateful to Ninon for her tenderness. He never missed a reception and sang her praises on every occasion. Writing to Saint-Evremond to announce his death, Ninon, herself very aged, says, "His mind had retained all the charms of his youth, and his heart all the sweetness and tenderness of a true friend." She felt the loss of this common friend, for she again writes of him afterward, "His life and that I live had much in common. It is like dying oneself to meet with such a loss."

It was at this period of her life that Ninon occupied her time more than ever in endearing herself to her friends. As says Saint-Evremond, "She contents herself with ease and rest, after having enjoyed the liveliest pleasures of life." Although she was never mistress of the invincible inclination toward the pleasures of the senses which nature had given her, it appears that Ninon made some efforts to control them. Referring to the ashes which are sprinkled on the heads of the penitent faithful on Ash Wednesday, she insisted that instead of the usual prayer of abnegation there should be substituted the words, "We must avoid the movements of love." What she wrote Saint-Evremond might give rise to the belief that she sometimes regretted her weakness, "Everybody tells me that I have less to complain of in my time than many another. However that may be, if any one had proposed to me such a life I would have hanged myself." One of her favorite maxims, however, was, "We must provide a stock of provisions arid not of pleasures, they should be taken as they come."

That her philosophical principles did not change is certain from the fact that she retained all her friends, and gained new ones who flocked to her reunions. Says Madame de Coulanges in one of her letters, "The women are running after Mademoiselle de l'Enclos now as much as the men used to do. How can any one hate old age after such an example." This reflection did not originate with Ninon, who regretted little her

former pleasures, and besides, friendship with her had as many sacred rights as love. From what Madame de Coulanges says, one might suppose that the men had deserted Ninon in her old age, leaving women to take their place, but Madame de Sévigné was of a different opinion. She says, "Corbinelli asks me about the new marvels taking place at Mademoiselle de l'Enclos' house in the way of good company. She assembles around her in her old age, whatever Madame de Coulanges may say to the contrary, both men and women, but even if women did not flock to her side, she could console herself for having had men in her young days to please."

The celebrated English geometrician, Huygens, visited Ninon during a sojourn at Paris in the capacity of ambassador. He was so charmed with the attractions of, her person, and with her singing, that he fell into poetry to express his admiration. French verses from an Englishman, who was a geometrician and not a poet, were as surprising to Ninon and her friends as they will be to the reader. They are not literature but express what was in the mind of the famous scientist:

"Elle a cinq instruments dont je suis amoureux,
Les deux premiers, ses mains, les deux autres, ses yeux;
Pour le dernier de tous, et cinquième qui reste,
Il faut être galant et leste."

In the year 1696, when Ninon had reached eighty, she had several attacks of illness that worried her friends exceedingly. The Marquis de Coulanges writes, "Our amiable l'Enclos has a cold which does not please me." A short time afterward he again wrote, "Our poor l'Enclos has a low fever which redoubles in the evening, and a sore throat which worries her friends." These trifling ailments were nothing to Ninon, who, though growing feeble, maintained her philosophy, as she said, "I am contenting myself with what happens from day to day; forgetting today what occurred yesterday, and holding on to a used up body as one that has been very agreeable." She saw the term of her life coming to an end without any qualms or fear. "If I could only believe with Madame de Chevreuse, that by dying we can go and talk with all our friends in the other world, it would be a sweet thought."

Madame de Maintenon, then in the height of her power and influence, had never forgotten the friend of her youth, and now, she offered her lodgings at Versailles. It is said that her intention was to enable the king to profit by an intimacy with a woman of eighty-five years who, in spite of bodily infirmities, possessed the same vivacity of mind and delicacy of taste that had contributed to her great renown, much more than her personal charms and frailties. But Ninon was born for liberty, and had never been willing to sacrifice her philosophical tranquility for the hope of greater fortune and position in the world. Accordingly, she thanked her old friend, and as the only concession she would grant, consented to stand in the chapel of Versailles where Louis the Great could pass and satisfy his curiosity to see once, at least, the astonishing marvel of his reign.

During the latter years of her life, she took a fancy to young Voltaire, in whom she detected signs of future greatness. She fortified him with her counsel, which he prayed her to give him, and left him a thousand francs in her will to buy books. Voltaire attempted to earn the money by ridiculing the memory of his benefactress.

At the age of ninety years, Mademoiselle de l'Enclos grew feebler every day, and felt that death would not be long coming. She performed all her social duties, however, until the very end, refusing to surrender until compelled. On the last night of her life, unable to sleep, she arose, and at her desk wrote the following verses:

"Qu'un vain espoir ne vienne point s'offrir,
Qui puisse ébranler mon courage;
Je suis en âge de mourir;
Que ferias-je ici davantage?"

("Let no vain hope now come and try,
My courage strong to overthrow;
My age demands that I shall die,
What more can I do here below?")

On the seventeenth of October, 1706, she expired as gently as one who falls asleep.