

JACQUES CASANOVA, ADVENTURER.

BY EDWARD H. EPPENS

A PRECOCIOUS child born of irresponsible parents, a rival of Cagliostro, *persona non grata* to every government of Europe, friend of popes and paupers, the philosopher of the paradox, count by the divine right of free choice, and poet in the true succession of Petrarch and Tasso: such was Jacques Casanova de Seingalt.

No Count of Monte Cristo had more adventures; no saint, fewer regrets. To account for such a combination is to make an inventory of eighteenth century morals. Tartuffe and Friar Tuck, Nietzsche and Heine, mixed in equal parts and seasoned with a strong dash of Venetian wit—that is the recipe for the *Memoirs*, which, in spite of the Index, maintains its honored place as one of the five greatest autobiographies ever written.

With a distinction: The harmless prattle of Pepys, the prince of gossipers, makes a fine quarry for the historian of English court-life; but Casanova knows a dozen capitals as well as London. Pepys is insular; Casanova is cosmopolitan, an Italian who settles in Bohemia to write in French about English lords he met in Switzerland. The Little Trianon of Louis XV is as well known to him as the boudoirs of Constantinople, and what the courtiers in Rome cannot tell may be gathered from the august lips of His Royal Highness, Frederic the Great. Benevenuto Cellini's autobiography is more of an art-product, as becomes the creator of Perseus; Casanova can talk as learnedly of prosody, of Mengs the painter, and the whole galaxy of contemporary actors and musicians as the goldsmith does of jewelry. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit* we have the constant aim to correlate the personal and the universal, the poetic justification of private opinions and the genealogy of great thoughts; Casanova, needless to say, lacked Goethe's world-wide vision and interests—introspection was, to him, a sort of penance;—at the same time he avoided, at least before his last days at Dux, the semblance of

pedantry which we associate with the schematic purpose that accounts for every whim and fancy in the great catalog of life. Rousseau, finally, was too much of a visionary to appeal lastingly to a realistic world—Casanova scorned to call his great work by the name of "Confessions"—and for pure, unadulterated realism the *Memoirs* stand unrivaled. Not even in the note-book narrative of *The Cloister and the Hearth* or in the more photographic picture-galleries of Zola can be found passages that equal in variety and in essential truthfulness the stories of the thousand and one escapades which the writer describes with such abandon and mental balance.

The Prince de Ligne easily overshot the mark when he spoke of "this incomparable man, whose every word is a thought and every thought a book," but the books are there to prove that Casanova was not an ordinary man—a boy who disports himself in Latin squibs at eleven and who earns a doctorate of canonical and civil laws before he is sixteen is not a common mortal! He may have been headstrong, he certainly was a coxcomb, but he was never dull. "I was always happy," he admits, "when I entrapped stupid folks. I believe it is commendable for a man of *esprit* to fool blockheads, for their hateful company always makes me feel stupid."

His contemporaries (he was born 1725) testify that his originality was so engaging and the dramatic force with which he told of his exploits so compelling that kings and queens courted his company. Without knowing it he outdid *Gil Blas* and *The Devil on Two Sticks*. His account of the escape from the state-prisons of Venice as he recited it up and down the land, after all the inventions of vanity are lopped away, is for breathless interest and thrilling intensity easily the first of its kind in the whole range of melodramatic literature. Dumas and the annalists of Andersonville Prison must yield the palm to Casanova.

To follow the fortunes of this abbé-sonneteer, this philosophizing card-sharper and mountebank, is to draw a maze of lines connecting all the famous pleasure-resorts and political storm-centers of Europe. He was the knight errant of the eighteenth century, the Ahasuerus of the literary world, constantly gravitating between the faro-banks and the soirées of fashionable blue-stockings.

On his ninth birthday a boat-ride helps him to discover that the earth must revolve around the sun—a conclusion which scandalizes his good actress-mother, a sort of raven parent who seemed only too glad to be rid of the long-headed charge that burdened

her life. He tells her afterwards, by way of revenge, that her theatrical efforts are abominable, fine limb o' the law that he is!

From the day that he enters the pension in Padua—a sort of Dotheboys school where for a sequin a month the starving little sufferers were victimized by servants, rats, and fleas—to the day he solves the “mathematical problem of the cube,” for which feat the Elector of Saxony tenders him a gift, this moral nondescript proves himself the match of fickle fortune, “correcting” it when necessary, like his dramatic counterfeit, Riccaut de la Marliniere in Lessing’s masterpiece. Could Thackeray have had him in mind when he wrote *Barry Lyndon* or *The Yellowblush Papers*? “I had discovered about fifty smoked herring in the pantry. I devoured them all, besides the sausages; the eggs in the poultry-house I made sure of before they were fairly cool.” The less energetic classmates offer him tribute of chickens and money. This was the training that formed the genius who in due time relieved the French treasury by financing a successful lottery and who was sent to discount the royal paper of Holland!

His ambition was to study medicine, and the motive adduced is reminiscent of the advice of Mephisto to Faust’s student concerning the fine points of the healing art; he confesses coolly, “if people had understood me they would not have objected. I would have adopted medicine, a profession in which the charlatan can get farther than even in the law.”

In Venice he takes holy orders; at fifteen he preaches a sermon on a theme taken from his favorite Horace and is so elated over his success that he tempts the fates again, gets stuck in the exordium, has an opportune fainting spell, and leaves the scene of his fiasco posthaste like a thief at night. He is driven out of a seminary and awakens one morning to find himself a prisoner at St. Andrew’s—a fort erected at the point where once a year the Doge committed a ring to his ocean-bride. The reason for this the first of many imprisonments is glossed over with characteristic dexterity.

Here he is insulted by a certain Razzetta, who soon has reason to regret his rashness. “I planned everything carefully to take revenge with impunity and to be able to prove an alibi in case I killed my man, as I intended. On the day before the chosen night I took a walk with the son of the adjutant. Jumping from a bastion I acted as if I had sprained my ankle. Two soldiers carried me to my room, the surgeon of the fort applied a compress and ordered me to remain abed. Everybody came to visit me and I requested that my guard be allowed to sleep in my room. I knew that a

glass of spirits would be sufficient to intoxicate him and send him into a sound sleep. At half past ten I entered the boat engaged for the expedition. When I reached Venice I bought a heavy cane and sat down in a doorway at the entrance of the street, not far from the Piazza di San Paolo. A small canal passing the end of the street seemed just made to receive my foe. In fifteen minutes I saw my man approaching slowly. I struck him a blow on the head, another on the arm; a third, more vigorously dealt, knocked him into the canal. Like an arrow I flew over the piazza, the bridge, to the gondola which soon brought me back to the fortress. It struck midnight at the moment I was crawling through the window into my room. I undressed hurriedly and tumbled into bed and aroused the soldier with a terrible yell, telling him to call the surgeon immediately, for I was dying of colic. The almoner came down and found me in spasms. After writhing around for over an hour I declared that I felt much better. . . . After the noon hour the major came to me. 'I have a fine piece of news for you,' he said with a smile. 'Razzetta got a good thrashing last night and was dumped into the canal.' 'And was he not killed?' 'No; and that's a fine thing for you, for everybody thinks you are the guilty one.' 'I am glad they think so; that's some revenge. But to prove the charge, that would be a different matter.' 'Exactly. But Razzetta claims to have recognized you. His nose is crushed, three teeth are gone, and his right arm is bruised severely. He has entered complaint against you with the avvocatore. I have just certified that you were in bed with a sprained ankle and that at midnight you thought you were dying of an attack of colic.' 'And was Razzetta assaulted at midnight?' 'So he declares. You must expect to be examined, my dear abbé.' 'So I must, and at the examination I shall assure him that I am very sorry I am innocent.' An alibi was soon established and the avvocatore sentenced Razzetta to pay the costs.

Casanova's wanderings are a carnival of adventures, proving a hundred times over that truth is ever stranger than fiction. Exorcisms, mystifications, amatory intrigues, duels poetical and sanguinary, follow each other pell-mell. He wins the terno. He will undertake to metamorphose Madame d'Urfé, an old dupe, for a consideration. For a thousand sequins he manufactures the original scabbard out of an old boot to fit the veritable sword with which St. Peter cut off Malchus's ear. In Venice he fiddles, in Rome he prays, in Paris he squanders a fortune, and in Switzerland he has to borrow a suit of clothes. In Portici he gets stranded and

sells for \$7000 the secret of adulterating mercury with lead and bismuth.

His journey to Calabria in company with a renegade Capuchin monk is an Italian Odyssey; poor Gerard and *le-diable-est-mort* Denys, over whom we have puled and smiled and frowned, are vulgar stage-strutters in comparison. Imagine an Herculean beggar monk who avoids cloisters like pest-houses, who steals truffles and refuses absolution to pretty maids, who eats the last miserable chicken of a miserable family, an ecclesiastical Sancho Panza with a mantle of twelve pouches containing a load of provender for several weeks, bread, wine, meats, cheese, chickens, eggs, hams, and sausages; altogether a capital figure for opera bouffe: that was Brother Stephano.

Arrived at his destination, Casanova decides that the men are too stupid and the women too ugly; that it is inglorious to die a martyr's death, and leaves with the bishop's blessing, which amounts to but very little, since the episcopal stipend is only 500 ducats a year. Rome holds him but little longer. Constantinople, whither he drifts on a fool's errand, proves no more attractive, notwithstanding the charms of Islam and polygamy. Finally, an apoplectic Venetian senator, M. de Bragadin, has the good sense to accept the wanderer as his quack-in-chief and cabalistic adviser. Casanova had a theory that whatever he wanted very badly he always got sooner or later; he might have been pope or the Grand Vizier! His fortune is now made—for a while. His unsteady star leads him to Paris. There he drinks deep of Pleasure's cup, charmed by the blandishments of the demi-monde and the aristocracy alike. One of his social campaigns cost him 30,000 livres; it was a mad whirl of operas, ladies, dinners, livrees, everything that was genteel—a remarkable achievement for a man with no respectable means of support.

This soldier of fortune was not a vulgar gamester: it requires more than mere bravado or tricks of the mountabank to rivet the serious attention of the student. His writings show, from first to last, that he was a man of wit, of unusual vivacity, quick to grasp the moment's chance. His most shocking escapades, utterly repulsive to our moral sense, retain the unmistakable glamor of esthetic distinction. In the pursuit of Circe he was an artist. If he was a rogue, since nature had made him so, he would at least try to be a gentlemanly one. The mayor of Nuremberg once asked him where he got his title of nobility, de Seingalt? "I bear the name by virtue of the alphabet!" He had made it himself to supply

the natural deficiency. That he flaunted the title for having shot a Polish general through the belly is characteristic of his obtuseness. His fund of resources was unmeasured. He would know everything. *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.*

The result is inevitable. His *Memoirs* contain a bewildering mass of adventures, throwing the most unexpected side-lights on the history of the times. They form one of the richest source-books for the historical student. They have the material for a score of romances, as may be verified by not a few writers who have boldly stolen from him without a word to show in what preserves they have been poaching. They contain one of the most effective ghost-stories in existence.

A Greek had drawn upon himself the vengeance of our hero. Casanova went to the Campo Santo and procured the arm of a corpse that had just been buried. With this ghastly burden he secreted himself under the bed of his intended victim. "In fifteen minutes he entered and went to bed. I waited until he was almost asleep and then pulled the covers. He laughed and said, 'Let me sleep. I do not believe in ghosts.' In a few minutes I repeated the trick. He insisted that he was not afraid of ghosts and started to adjust the covers, which I held fast. He stooped over to catch the hand that held the cover, but I managed that he grasped the dead arm at which he tugged for a while. Then he fell back in a faint. . . He remained an idiot all the rest of his life, subject to fits."

A man so full of animal spirits would not tolerate the restraints of a conventional morality and yet he preserved to the end of his days—let that be said in extenuation of his oblique ethics—a quizzical respect for true charity, honesty, and incorruptible virtue: traits none too common at the court of Louis XV or in the entourage of Clement XIII and Pius VI.

Casanova was the product of his surroundings; a splendid illustration of the truism that piety and rascality are often twin-brothers. The Sicilian brigand will perform his devotions with superstitious punctilio and leave the chapel to cut a traveler's throat. Casanova suffers the qualms of conscience for having neglected the confessional and straightway turns a sanctuary into a pandemonium of artistic excesses. The one did not forbid the other. Whether he was always as sincere as he claimed to be is extremely doubtful; his very ingenuousness in reciting details that reflect upon his character is at times suspicious, for no person will deliberately make himself worse than he is; but whatever the deflection from the moral code may be, it is generally traceable to some psychological

disability, a twist in the temperament or a mental callousness insensible to the finer shades of right and wrong. His character is a fine subject for the casuist. It is certainly a novelty to find a person who justifies the rifling of his friends' pockets because their money would harm them. Who ever reasoned that it was fair to cheat in order to sharpen the victims wits? What is more refreshing than his claim to a passionate love of truth, for which he would force an entrance into less appreciative noddles by the back-stairs, as it were, lying to make others truthful? Here was lying for a purpose! Did life ever present a neater puzzle in casuistry than when he takes revenge on a vile detractor by saying all manner of noble things about him, knowing that his correct statements would be twisted and ridiculed?

He was liberal to the point of weakness. Five hundred louis d'or and a bundle of furs was an ordinary offering to a common trull. Nanette succeeded Bettina, Madame F. supplanted Bellino; Henriette and M. M. and the whole procession of engaging heart-breakers found this Don Juan a magnificent spender. And he was serenely satisfied because the immense sums were amassed for the very purpose of giving pleasure. He would have felt guilty with a competence in his old age at Dux, where he had to rely upon the charity of his friends. That would have been a "misappropriation of funds." Frederic of Prussia once asked him, "Have you money?" "No," was the answer. "All the better; you will be satisfied with a small salary." "I am forced to it. I have spent over a million." "How did you get that sum?" "By means of the Cabala." All with the indifference of the seasoned punter that he was, much like a stock-gambler to whom the million made over night is but an episode.

What makes his personality doubly interesting is the fact that he always courted the company of his betters. His pages are strewn with hundreds of anecdotes about the illustrious friends he made. The Prince de Ligne, hero of many battles and writer of note, one of his fairest critics, speaks repeatedly of the distinction friendship with this adventurer conferred. Casanova was as fastidious about his companions as he was about his silk stockings or his famous suppers. The commonplace could not fascinate him. One is constantly reminded of his gustatory confession of faith: "I always liked highly flavored dishes: macaroni prepared by a Neapolitan cook, the *olla podrida* of Spain, the fat codfish of Newfoundland, high game, and cheese filled with skippers."

He relished the daring speculations in the field of magic, meta-

physics and high finance, the spice of epigrammatic wit-combats, and men of sense were attracted to him because he could give as good as he received. With Voltaire he had literary feasts at which bon-mots, improvisations, and criticisms jostled each other in bewildering variety. "M. de Voltaire," by way of introduction, "this is the happiest moment of my life. For twenty years I have been your disciple and at last I have the good fortune to see my master." "Monsieur, do honor to me twenty years longer and then promise to bring me my fee." "Gladly, if you will promise to wait for me."—"Have you written any sonnets?" "Ten or twelve pretty good ones; two or three thousand which I didn't read a second time." The philosopher of Ferney eventually takes umbrage at Casanova's literary patriotism, is told that the *Henriade* is poor stuff in comparison with *La Gerusalemme liberata*, and soon becomes estranged from this mental Hercules who knows the fifty-one cantos of Ariosto by heart and quotes Horace at the gambling table.

Crébillon introduced him into the world of French letters. Fox played cards with him. The Duc de Vergennes was a familiar friend. Popes and cardinals, princes of all sorts crossed his paths. Haller, the physiologist who at the age of nine wrote a Chaldaic lexicon, corresponded with him and regaled him with fine meals and disquisitions on the philosopher's stone. Mengs benefited by his criticism on the anatomical shortcomings of paintings. Goethe and Wieland help to fill his canvass although, naturally, he liked them not. He taunted Joseph II to the face for having sold patents of nobility, and told the great Frederic, who slept with his hat on, that he didn't know His Majesty was so imposing! His multitudinous remarks on these celebrities are always spirited, always unexpected, if not always fair. Some worthies, no doubt, he treated much too jauntily. He decided that d'Alembert was a poor geometrician, d'Argens a poor philosopher, and Diderot a poor writer. His judgment was often at fault, but he had a right to his opinions, for he was no mean student himself.

As was the fashion of the day, he tried his pen at everything. Comedy and philosophy are alike welcome, he will write to order a play, a sermon, or an encyclopedia of cheese. He translated Homer and Horace into Italian. The *History of the Polish Disturbances* fills seven volumes. *The Escape from the Leads* turned the heads of Europe. His *Memoirs*, finally, the work on which his fame rests, will always deserve a place among the intimate confessions of literature. The style alone, as vivacious as the subject-matter, gives them the distinguished air. Stripped of the vulgarities tolerated

by the eighteenth century, these volumes still contain a vast hoard of material which one would be sorry to lose. In them he is inexhaustible. On two pages he speaks of fasts, slitted pantaloons, the Inquisition and the value of locks; the Iliad, tobacco, intrigues; stoves, tailors, gnats, executioners, the viaticum and the nuisance of kneeling. One is curious to know how he could have remembered all the trifling details of his checkered career.

But it would be unpardonable to dismiss Casanova without passing reference to his most famous exploit, for which he was lionized wherever he went: his escape from the notorious Leads of Venice where the persecution of the terrible Tribune of the Ten was sure to land him. Few tourists as they skip over the square of St. Mark's, Baedeker in hand, give him a passing thought, yet few more thrilling events attach to this historic spot (with the Campanile gone, alas!) than that excursion over the lead roofs in 1756, the year after the Lisbon earthquake.

The possession of the *Clavicula Salamonis*, the *Picatrix*, and similar books on demonology with other magical paraphernalia was the ostensible if not real reason for the visit of the *messer grande*. He paid a compliment to Casanova's valor—in Paris he had whipped forty with the assistance of a single friend—by bringing a whole troop of *sbirri*. The inevitable procession over the Bridge of Sighs followed, and soon the doors of a frightful rat-hole closed upon the condemned man, not, however, until he had been refreshed with the sight of the garotte and a detailed description of its use thrown in by the accommodating jailor. He carefully hung up his fine plumed hat, his silk mantle, and lace-covered suit, and then abandoned himself, first, to the horrors of the situation, then to the consolations of prison philosophy, and then to undaunted scheming to escape. The reading of Jesuitical books only intensified his desire for freedom. He prayed that the shock which destroyed Lisbon might demolish his prison. With a spike filed into the shape of an octagonal dagger he succeeded, with infinite pains, in digging a hole through the floor. The record of dogged patience and of despair in face of threatened discovery, how he manufactured a lamp to work at night; how he adjured the various saints because the father confessor had predicted his liberation on a certain saint's day—a prophecy that was fulfilled when he actually escaped on All Saints'; how he was transferred to better quarters and had his hole discovered; how he wrote letters using his finger-nail as a quill; how he studied the *Vulgate*—a fine medium for smuggling his precious dagger to the monk Balbi, who pierced the intervening

wall and opened a way to the roof; how they produced a materialization of a bearded angel to cow a traitorous fellow prisoner: all this makes capital reading for those who can forget that the writer is an arch-imposter and moral degenerate without parallel.

That he was more than that could be shown, if proof were necessary, by the Boethius-like meditations and the literary diversions indulged in to the accompaniment of clanking chains and the grim creaking of ponderous doors.

He was an adept in the cabalistic farrago fashionable at the time. Wesley had stooped to the use of bibliomancy, Charles I had been so successful at it, why not Casanova? Upon a recourse to his beloved Ariosto the oracle directs him to the startling words of the ninth canto, *Fra il fin d'ottobre e il capo di novembre*. The clock of St. Mark's struck midnight of the 31st of October when he and Balbi clambered up the slippery sheets of lead that covered the roof of the Ducal palace. He left behind him a parting gift to the Inquisitors in the shape of a dignified letter of protest. After several hair-raising mishaps the two got into an enclosed court where, to the utter chagrin of Balbi, Casanova took a long nap on the floor. Before long a porter unlocked the Chancery doors for them, taking the richly dressed elegant—the prisoner had donned his finery as for a ball—for a senator! To cap the climax Casanova presented himself at the home of the captain of the guard sent out to apprehend him, where he slept over night and refreshed body and mind!

Here was an experience to whet his failing appetite when he reached the sere and sober years of his retirement, worn out by the rigors of life.

Count Waldstein, a descendant of the great Wallenstein, offered the old man a sinecure of librarian in his domains at Dux in Bohemia. But here the ironies of old age and the chafing at the restrained conventions of society gradually wore him out. His decline was not adorned with the sweet temper of a man satisfied with life. The letters he wrote to his "best friend" the enemy, one Faulkinher, are pathetic in the extreme. Didn't this fellow accuse him of stealing and add bodily injury by beating him in public—the pig? The bon-vivant could not realize that the world had moved beyond him. He became a chronic, pedantic fault-finder. It's a difficult art to grow old gracefully. The macaroni is too hot; the cook spoils the polenta; the dogs bark too much, and the guests notice him too little; the priest wants to convert him; the hostler snubs him. He speaks a broken German and everybody laughs at him; he reads his

French poetry and everybody laughs again; he recites in Italian, more laughter; he dances and struts around with his white-plumed hat and silk ribbons and once more they laugh. "Cospetto!" says he, "Such a canaille! You are all Jacobins! You insult the Count, and the Count insults me!—My Lord, in Poland I shot a great general through the belly. I am no born nobleman, but I made myself into one!"

The puzzled reader stops to ask about the rationale of such a life. Morals? As well speak of the philosophy of a Patagonian. Casanova was the embodiment of an ethical paradox, uniting a rigorous code of honor with an unblushing cynicism. Fortified by a philosophy which, as he puts it, never spoiled anything he could at the same time abandon himself to all the vices of life. "I have lived a philosopher, and I die a Christian." were his parting words. The life itself must be the justification. The shibboleth of any system of ethical rules is meaningless when applied to so exceptional a case.

When Carlyle wished to refer to his *Life* he was unable to find a copy in all England. We are more fortunate, having it presented to us, if we will, in a shape more consonant with the spirit of our times, judiciously expurgated and hygienically deodorized so as not to offend the finer sense of our Anglo-Saxon conscience.*

**The Memoirs of Jaques Casanova de Seingalt*. In two volumes, London, 1902. Also *Jakob Sasanova, sein Leben und seine Werke*, by Victor Ottman, Stuttgart, 1900.