CASANOVA’S HOMECOMING

By

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CHAPTER ONE.

Casanova was in his fifty-third year. Though no longer driven by the lust of adventure that had spurred him in his youth, he was still hunted athwart the world, hunted now by a restlessness due to the approach of old age. His yearning for Venice, the city of his birth, grew so intense that, like a wounded bird slowly circling downwards in its death flight, he began to move in ever-narrowing circles. Again and again, during the last ten years of his exile, he had implored the Supreme Council for leave to return home. Erstwhile, in the drafting of these petitions—a work in which he was a past master—a defiant, wilful spirit seemed to have guided his pen; at times even he appeared to take a grim delight in his forwardness. But of late his requests had been couched in humble, beseeching words which displayed, ever more plainly, the ache of homesickness and genuine repentance.

The sins of his earlier years (the most unpardonable to the Venetian councillors was his free-thinking, not his dissoluteness, or quarrelsomeness, or rather sportive knavery) were by degrees passing into oblivion, and so Casanova had a certain amount of confidence that he would receive a hearing. The history of his marvellous escape from The Leads of Venice, which he had recounted on innumerable occasions at the courts of princes, in the palaces of nobles, at the supper tables of burghers, and in houses of ill fame, was beginning to make people forget any disrepute which had attached to his name. Moreover, in letters to Mantua, where he had been staying for two months, persons of influence had conveyed hope to the adventurer, whose inward and outward lustre were gradually beginning to fade, that ere long there would come a favorable turn in his fortunes.

Since his means were now extremely slender, Casanova had decided to await the expected pardon in the modest but respectable inn where he had stayed in happier years. To make only passing mention of less spiritual amusements, with which he could not wholly dispense—he spent most of his time in writing a polemic against the slanderer Voltaire, hoping that the publication of this document would serve, upon his return to Venice, to give him unchallenged position and prestige in the eyes of all well-disposed citizens.

One morning he went out for a walk beyond the town limits to excogitate the final touches for some sentences that were to annihilate the infidel Frenchman. Suddenly he fell prey to a disquiet that almost amounted to physical distress. He turned over in his mind the life he had been leading for the last three months. It had grown wearisomely familiar—the morning walks into the country, the evenings spent in gambling for petty stakes with the reputed Baron Perotti and the latter's pock-marked mistress. He thought of the affection lavished upon himself by his hostess, a woman ardent but no longer young. He thought of how he had passed his time over the writings of Voltaire and over the composition of an audacious rejoinder which until that moment had seemed to him by no means inadequate. Yet now, in the dulcet atmosphere of a morning in late summer, all these things appeared stupid and repulsive.
Muttering a curse without really knowing upon whose head he wished it to alight, gripping the hilt of his sword, darting angry glances in all directions as if invisible scornful eyes were watching him in the surrounding solitude, he turned on his heel and retraced his steps back to the town, determined to make arrangements that very hour for immediate departure. He felt convinced that a more genial mood would possess him were he to diminish even by a few miles the distance that separated him from the home for which he longed. It was necessary to hasten, so that he might be sure of booking a place in the diligence. It was to leave at eventide by the eastward road. There was little else to do, for he really need not bother to pay a farewell visit to Baron Perotti. Half an hour would suffice for the packing of all his possessions. He thought of the two suits, the shabbier of which he was wearing at that moment; of the much darned, though once elegant, underlinen. With two or three snuffboxes, a gold watch and chain, and a few books, these comprised his whole worldly wealth. He called to mind past splendors, when he had travelled as a man of distinction, driving in a fine carriage; when he had been well furnished both with necessaries and with superfluities; when he had even had his own servingman—who had usually, of course, been a rogue. These memories brought impotent anger in their train, and his eyes filled with tears. A young woman drove towards him, whip in hand. In her little cart, amid sacks and various odds and ends, lay her husband, drunk and snoring. Casanova strode by beneath the chestnut trees that lined the highway, his face working with wrath, unintelligible phrases hissing from between his clenched teeth. The woman glanced at him inquisitively and mockingly at first, then, on encountering an angry glare, with some alarm, and finally, after she had passed, there was amorous invitation in the look she gave him over her shoulder. Casanova, who was well aware that rage and hatred can assume the semblance of youth more readily than can gentleness and amiability, was prompt to realize that a bold response on his part would bring the cart to a standstill, and that the young woman would be ready to give him any assignation he pleased. Nevertheless, although the recognition of this fact put him in a better humor for the nonce, it seemed hardly worth while to waste minutes upon so trivial an adventure. He was content, therefore, to allow the peasant woman to drive her cart and all its contents unimpeded through the dust of the roadway.

The sun was now high in the heavens, and the shade of the trees hardly tempered the heat. Casanova was soon compelled to moderate his pace.

Under the thick powder of dust the shabbiness of his garments was no longer apparent, so that by his dress and bearing he might easily have been taken for a gentleman of station who had been pleased for once in a way to walk instead of drive. He had almost reached the arched gateway near his inn, when he met a heavy country carriage lumbering along the road. In it was seated a stoutish man, well dressed, and still fairly young. His hands were clasped across his stomach, his eyelids drooped, and he seemed about to doze off, when of a sudden he caught sight of Casanova, and a great change took place in him. His whole aspect betrayed great excitement. He sprang to his feet, but too quickly, and fell back into his seat. Rising again, he gave the driver a punch in the back, to make the fellow pull up. But since the carriage did not stop instantly, the passenger turned round so as not to lose sight of Casanova, signalled with both hands, and finally called to him thrice by name, in a thin, dear voice. Not till he heard the voice, did Casanova recognize who it was. By now the
The carriage had stopped, and Casanova smilingly seized two hands outstretched towards him, saying:

“Olivo, is it really you?”

“Yes, Signor Casanova, it is I. You recognize me, then?”

“Why not? Since I last saw you, on your wedding day, you’ve put on flesh; but very likely I’ve changed a good deal, too, in these fifteen years, though not perhaps in the same fashion.”

“Not a bit of it,” exclaimed Olivo. “Why, Signor Casanova, you have hardly changed at all! And it is more than fifteen years; the sixteen years were up a few days ago. As you can imagine, Amalia and I had a good talk about you on the anniversary of our wedding.”

“Indeed?” said Casanova cordially. “You both think of me at times?”

The tears came to Olivo’s eyes. He was still holding Casanova’s hands, and he pressed them fondly.

“We have so much to thank you for, Signor Casanova. How could we ever forget our benefactor? Should we do so...”

“Don’t speak of it,” interrupted Casanova. “How is Signora Amalia? Do you know, I have been living in Mantua three months, very quietly to be sure, but taking plenty of walks as I always have done. How is it, Olivo, that I never met you or your wife before?”

“The matter is simple, Signor Casanova. Both Amalia and I detest the town, and we gave up living there a long time ago. Would you do me the favor to jump in? We shall be at home in an hour.”

Casanova tried to excuse himself, but Olivo insisted.

“I will take no denial. How delighted Amalia will be to see you once more, and how proud to show you our three children. Yes, we have three, Signor Casanova. All girls. Thirteen, ten, and eight—not one of them old enough yet—you’ll excuse me, won’t you—to have her head turned by Casanova.”

He laughed good-humoredly, and made as if to help Casanova into the carriage. The latter shook his head. He had been tempted for a moment by natural curiosity to accept Olivo’s invitation. Then his impatience returned in full force, and he assured his would-be host that unfortunately urgent business called him away from Mantua that very afternoon.

What could he expect to find in Olivo’s house? Sixteen years were a long time! Amalia would be no younger and no prettier. At his age, a girl of thirteen would not find him interesting. Olivo, too, whom he had known in old days as a lean and eager student, was now a portly, countrified paterfamilias. The proposed visit did not offer sufficient attractions to induce Casanova to abandon a journey that was to bring him thirty or forty miles nearer to Venice.

Olivo, however, was disinclined to take no for an answer. Casanova must at least accept a lift back to the inn, a kindly suggestion that could not decently be refused. It was only a few minutes’ drive. The hostess, a buxom woman in the middle thirties, welcomed Casanova with a glance that did not fail to disclose to Olivo the tender relationship between the pair. She shook hands with Olivo as an old acquaintance. She was a customer of Signor Olivo’s, she explained to Casanova, for an excellent medium-dry wine grown on his estate.
Olivo hastened to announce that the Chevalier de Seingalt (the hostess had addressed Casanova by this title, and Olivo promptly followed suit) was so churlish as to refuse the invitation of an old friend, on the ridiculous plea that to-day of all days he had to leave Mantua. The woman’s look of gloom convinced Olivo that this was the first she had heard of Casanova’s intended departure, and the latter felt it desirable to explain that his mention of the journey had been a mere pretext, lest he should inconvenience his friend’s household by an unexpected visit, and that he had, in fact, an important piece of writing to finish during the next few days, and no place was better suited for the work than the inn, where his room was agreeably cool and quiet.

Olivo protested that the Chevalier de Seingalt would do his modest home the greatest possible honor by finishing the work in question there. A change to the country could not but be helpful in such an undertaking. If Casanova should need learned treatises and works of reference, there would be no lack of them, for Olivo’s niece, the daughter of a deceased half-brother, a girl who though young was extremely erudite, had arrived a few weeks before with a whole trunkful of books. Should any guests drop in at times of an evening, the Chevalier need not put himself about—unless, indeed, after the labors of the day, cheerful conversation or a game of cards might offer welcome distraction. Directly Casanova heard of the niece, he decided he would like to make her acquaintance, and after a show of further reluctance he yielded to Olivo’s solicitation, declaring, however, that on no account would he be able to leave Mantua for more than a day or two. He begged the hostess to forward promptly by messenger any letters that should arrive during his absence, since they might be of the first importance.

Matters having thus been arranged to Olivo’s complete satisfaction, Casanova went to his room, made ready for the journey, and returned to the parlor in a quarter of an hour. Olivo, meanwhile, had been having a lively business talk with the hostess. He now rose, drank off his glass of wine, and with a significant wink promised to bring the Chevalier back, not perhaps to-morrow or the day after, but in any case in good order and condition. Casanova, however, had suddenly grown distraught and irritable. So cold was his farewell to the fond hostess that, at the carriage door, she whispered a parting word in his ear which was anything but amiable.

During the drive along the dusty road beneath the glare of the noonday sun, Olivo gave a garrulous and somewhat incoherent account of his life since the friends’ last meeting. Shortly after his marriage he had bought a plot of land near the town, and had started in a small way as market gardener. Doing well at this trade, he had gradually been able to undertake more ambitious farming ventures. At length, under God’s favor, and thanks to his own and his wife’s efficiency, he had been able three years earlier to buy from the pecuniarily embarrassed Count Marazzani the latter’s old and somewhat dilapidated country seat with a vineyard attached. He, his wife, and his children were comfortably settled upon this patrician estate, though with no pretence to patrician splendor. All these successes were ultimately due to the hundred and fifty gold pieces that Casanova had presented to Amalia, or rather to her mother. But for this magical aid, Olivo’s lot would still have been the same. He would still have been giving instruction in reading and writing to ill-behaved youngsters. Most likely, he would have been an old bachelor and Amalia an old maid.
Casanova let him ramble on without paying much heed. The incident was one among many of the date to which it belonged. As he turned it over in his mind, it seemed to him the most trivial of them all, it had hardly even troubled the waters of memory.

He had been travelling from Rome to Turin or Paris—he had forgotten which. During a brief stay in Mantua, he caught sight of Amalia in church one morning. Pleased with her appearance, with her handsome but pale and somewhat woebegone face, he gallantly addressed her a friendly question. In those days everyone had been complaisant to Casanova. Gladly opening her heart to him, the girl told him that she was not well off; that she was in love with an usher who was likewise poor; that his father and her own mother were both unwilling to give their consent to so inauspicious a union. Casanova promptly declared himself ready to help matters on. He sought an introduction to Amalia’s mother, a good-looking widow of thirty-six who was still quite worthy of being courted. Ere long Casanova was on such intimate terms with her that his word was law. When her consent to the match had been won, Olivo’s father, a merchant in reduced circumstances, was no longer adverse, being specially influenced by the fact that Casanova (presented to him as a distant relative of the bride’s mother) undertook to defray the expenses of the wedding and to provide part of the dowry. To Amalia, her generous patron seemed like a messenger from a higher world. She showed her gratitude in the manner prompted by her own heart. When, the evening before her wedding, she withdrew with glowing cheeks from Casanova’s last embrace, she was far from thinking that she had done any wrong to her future husband, who after all owed his happiness solely to the amiability and open-handedness of this marvellous friend. Casanova had never troubled himself as to whether Amalia had confessed to Olivo the length to which she had gone in gratitude to her benefactor; whether, perchance, Olivo had taken her sacrifice as a matter of course, and had not considered it any reason for retrospective jealousy; or whether Olivo had always remained in ignorance of the matter. Nor did Casanova allow these questions to harass his mind today.

The heat continued to increase. The carriage, with bad springs and hard cushions, jolted the occupants abominably. Olivo went on chattering in his high, thin voice; talking incessantly of the fertility of his land, the excellencies of his wife, the good behavior of his children, and the innocent pleasures of intercourse with his neighbors—farmers and landed gentry. Casanova was bored. He began to ask himself irritably why on earth he had accepted an invitation which could bring nothing but petty vexations, if not positive disagreeables. He thought longingly of the cool parlor in Mantua, where at this very hour he might have been working unhindered at his polemic against Voltaire. He had already made up his mind to get out at an inn now in sight, hire whatever conveyance might be available, and drive back to the town, when Olivo uttered a loud “Hullo!” A pony trap suddenly pulled up, and their own carriage came to a halt, as if by mutual understanding. Three young girls sprang out, moving with such activity that the knife-board on which they had been sitting flew into the air and was overturned.

“My daughters,” said Olivo, turning to Casanova with a proprietary air. Casanova promptly moved as if to relinquish his seat in the carriage.
“Stay where you are, my dear Chevalier,” said Olivo. “We shall be at home in a quarter of an hour, and for that little while we can all make shift together. Maria, Nanetta, Teresina, this is the Chevalier de Seingalt, an old friend of mine. Shake hands with him. But for him you would....”

He broke off, and whispered to Casanova: “I was just going to say something foolish.”

Amending his phrase, he said: “But for him, things would have been very different!”

Like their father, the girls had black hair and dark eyes. All of them including Teresina, the eldest, who was still quite the child, looked at the stranger with frank rustic curiosity. Casanova did not stand upon ceremony; he kissed each of the girls upon either cheek. Olivo said a word or two to the lad who was driving the trap in which the children had come, and the fellow whipped up the pony and drove along the road towards Mantua.

Laughing and joking, the girls took possession of the seat opposite Olivo and Casanova. They were closely packed; they all spoke at once; and since their father likewise went on talking, Casanova found it far from easy at first to follow the conversation. One name caught his ear, that of Lieutenant Lorenzi. Teresina explained that the Lieutenant had passed them on horseback not long before, had said he intended to call in the evening, and had sent his respects to Father. Mother had at first meant to come with them to meet Father, but as it was so frightfully hot she had thought it better to stay at home with Marcolina. As for Marcolina, she was still in bed when they left home. When they came along the garden path they had pelted her with hazel nuts through the open window, or she would still be asleep.

“That’s not Marcolina’s way,” said Olivo to his guest. “Generally she is at work in the garden at six or even earlier, and sits over her books till dinner time. Of course we had visitors yesterday, and were up later than usual. We had a mild game of cards—not the sort of game you are used to, for we are innocent folk and don’t want to win money from one another. Besides, our good Abbate usually takes a hand, so you can imagine, Chevalier, that we don’t play for high stakes.”

At the mention of the Abbate, the three girls laughed again, had an anecdote to tell, and this made them laugh more than ever. Casanova nodded amiably, without paying much attention. In imagination he saw Marcolina, as yet unknown to him, lying in her white bed, opposite the window. She had thrown off the bedclothes; her form was half revealed; still heavy with sleep she moved her hands to ward off the hail of nuts. His senses flamed. He was as certain that Marcolina and Lieutenant Lorenzi were in love with one another as if he had seen them in a passionate embrace. He was just as ready to detest the unknown Lorenzi as to long for the never seen Marcolina.

Through the shimmering haze of noon, a small, square tower now became visible, thrusting upward through the greyish-green foliage. The carriage turned into a by-road. To the left were vineyards rising on a gentle slope; to the right the crests of ancient trees showed above the wall of a garden. The carriage halted at a doorway in the wall. The weather-worn door stood wide. The passengers alighted, and at the master’s nod the coachman drove away to the stable. A broad path led through a chestnut avenue to the house, which at first sight had an almost neglected appearance. Casanova’s attention was especially attracted by a broken window in the first story. Nor did it escape his notice that
the battlements of the squat tower were crumbling in places. But the house door was gracefully carved; and directly he entered the hall it was plain that the interior was carefully kept, and was certainly in far better condition than might have been supposed from the outward aspect.

“Amalia,” shouted Olivo, so loudly that the vaulted ceiling rang, “Come down as quickly as you can! I have brought a friend home with me, an old friend whom you’ll be delighted to see!”

Amalia had already appeared on the stairs, although to most of those who had just come out of the glaring sunlight she was invisible in the twilit interior. Casanova, whose keen vision enabled him to see well even in the dark, had noted her presence sooner than Olivo. He smiled, and was aware that the smile made him look younger. Amalia had not grown fat, as he had feared. She was still slim and youthful. She recognized him instantly.

“What a pleasant surprise!” she exclaimed without the slightest embarrassment, hastening down the stairs, and offering her cheek to Casanova. The latter, nothing loath, gave her a friendly hug.

“What is it you see?” said he, “that Maria, Nanetta, and Teresina are your very own daughters, Amalia? No doubt the passage of the years makes it possible....”

“And all the other evidence is in keeping,” supplemented Olivo. “Rely upon that, Chevalier!”

Amalia let her eyes dwell reminiscently upon the guest. “I suppose,” she said, “it was your meeting with the Chevalier that has made you so late, Olivo?”

“Yes, that is why I am late. But I hope there is still something to eat?”

“Marcolina and I were frightfully hungry, but of course we have waited dinner for you.”

“Can you manage to wait a few minutes longer,” asked Casanova, “while I get rid of the dust of the drive?”

“I will show you your room immediately,” answered Olivo. “I do hope, Chevalier, you will find it to your taste; almost as much to your taste,” he winked, and added in a low tone, “as your room in the inn at Mantua—though here one or two little things may be lacking.”

He led the way upstairs into the gallery surrounding the hall. From one of the corners a narrow wooden stairway led into the tower. At the top, Olivo opened the door into the turret chamber, and politely invited Casanova to enter the modest guest chamber. A maidservant brought up the valise. Casanova was then left alone in a medium-sized room, simply furnished, but equipped with all necessaries. It had four tall and narrow bay-windows, commanding views to the four points of the compass, across the sunlit plain with its green vineyards, bright meadows, golden fields, white roads, light-colored houses, and dusky gardens. Casanova concerned himself little about the view, and hastened to remove the stains of travel, being impelled less by hunger than by an eager curiosity to see Marcolina face to face. He did not change, for he wished to reserve his best suit for evening wear.
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