

CASANOVA



HERE are few more delightful books in the world than Casanova's "Mémoires."—That is a statement I have long vainly sought to see in print. It is true, one learns casually that various eminent literary personages have cherished a high regard for this autobiography, have even considered it the ideal autobiography, that Wendell Holmes was once heard defending Casanova, that Thackeray found him good enough to borrow from. But these eminent personages—and how many more we shall never know—locked up the secret of their admiration for this book in some remote casket of their breasts; they never confided it to the cynical world. Every properly constituted "man of letters" has always recognized that any public allusion to Casanova should begin and end with lofty moral reprobation of his unspeakable turpitude.

No doubt whatever—and this apart from the question as to whether his autobiography should be counted as moral or immoral literature—Casanova delivered himself bound into the hands of the moralists. He may or may not have recognized this. He wrote at the end of a long and full life, in the friendly seclusion of a lonely Bohemian castle, when all things had become indifferent to him save the vivid memories of the past. It mattered little to him that the whirlwind of 1789 had just swept away the eighteenth century together with the moral maxims that passed current in that century. We have to accept this cardinal fact at the outset when we approach Casanova. And if a dweller in the highly respectable nineteenth century may be forgiven a first exclamation of horror at Casanova's wickedness, he has woefully failed in critical insight if he allows that exclamation to be his last word concerning these "Mémoires."

There are at least three points of view from which Casanova's "Mémoires" are of deep and permanent interest. In the first place they constitute a document of immense psychological value as the full and veracious presentation of a certain human type in its most complete development. In the second place, as a mere story of adventure and without reference to their veracity, the

"Mémoires" have never been surpassed, and only equalled by books written on a much smaller scale. In the third place, we here possess an unrivalled picture of the eighteenth century in its most characteristic aspects throughout Europe.

Casanova lived in an age which seems to have been favourable for the spontaneous revelation of human nature in literature. It was not only the age in which the novel reached full development ; it was the age of diaries and autobiographies. Pepys, indeed, though he died in the eighteenth century, had written his diary long before ; but during Casanova's lifetime Boswell was writing that biography which is so wonderful largely because it is so nearly an autobiography. Casanova's communicative countryman, Gozzi, was also his contemporary. Rousseau's "Confessions" only preceded Casanova's "Mémoires" by a few years, and a little later Restif de la Bretonne wrote "Monsieur Nicolas," and Madame Roland her "Mémoires Particulières." All these autobiographies are very unlike Casanova's. They mostly seem to present the *coulisses* of otherwise eminent and respectable lives. The highly-placed government official of versatile intellectual tastes exhibits himself as a monster of petty weaknesses ; the eloquent apostle of the return to Nature uncovers the corroding morbidities we should else never suspect ; the philanthropic pioneer in social reform exposes himself in a state of almost maniacal eroticism ; the austere heroine who was nourished on Plutarch confesses that she is the victim of unhappy passion. We are conscious of no such discords in Casanova's autobiography. Partly it may be because we have no other picture of Casanova before our eyes. Moreover, he had no conventional ideals to fall short of ; he was an adventurer from the first. "I am proud because I am nothing," he used to say. He could not boast of his birth ; he never held high position ; for the greatest part of his active career he was an exile ; at every moment of his life he was forced to rely on his own real and personal qualities. But the chief reason why we feel no disturbing discord in Casanova's "Mémoires" lies in the admirable skill with which he has therein exploited his unquestionable sincerity. He is a consummate master in the dignified narration of undignified experiences. Fortified, it is true, by a confessed and excessive *amour propre*, he never loses his fine sense of equilibrium, his power of presenting his own personality broadly and harmoniously. He has done a few dubious things in his time, he seems to say, and now and again found himself in positions that were ridiculous enough ; but as he looks back he feels that the like may have happened to any of us. He views these things with complete human tolerance as a necessary part of the whole picture, which it would be idle to slur over

or apologize for. He records them simply, not without a sense of humour, but with no undue sense of shame. In his heart, perhaps, he is confident that he has given the world one of its greatest books, and that posterity will require of him no such rhetorical justification as Rousseau placed at the head of his "Confessions."

In the preface to the "Mémoires," Casanova is sufficiently frank. He has not scrupled, he tells us, to defraud fools and rascals, "when necessary," and he has never regretted it. But such incidents have been but episodes in his life. He is not a sensualist, he says, for he has never neglected his duty—"when I had any"—for the allurements of sense; yet the main business of his life has ever been in the world of sense; "there is none of greater importance." "I have always loved women and have done my best to make them love me. I have also delighted in good cheer, and I have passionately followed whatever has excited my curiosity." Now in old age he reviews the joys of his life. He has learnt to be content with one meal a day, in spite of a sound digestion, but he recalls the dishes that delighted him: Neapolitan macaroni, Spanish olla podrida, Newfoundland cod, high-flavoured game, old cheese (has he not collected material for a "Dictionnaire des Fromages?"), and without any consciousness of abrupt transition he passes on to speak of the sweetness of the women he had loved. Then with a smile of pity he turns on those who call such tastes depraved, the poor insensate fools who think the Almighty is only able to enjoy our sorrow and abstinence, and bestows upon us for nought the gift of self-respect, the love of praise, the desire to excel, energy, strength, courage, and the power to kill ourselves when we will. And with the strain of Stoicism which is ever present to give fibre to his Epicureanism, he quotes the maxim which might well belong to both philosophies: "Nemo læditur nisi a seipso."

The fact that Casanova was on one side a Venetian must count for something in any attempt to explain him. Not indeed that Venice ever produced more than one Casanova; I would imply no such disrespect to Venice—or to Casanova; but the racial soil was favourable to such a personality. The Venetians are a branch of a northern people—allied by race as well as in art and commerce to the full-bodied, fair-haired people of the Rhine valley—who long since settled by the southern sea to grow mellow in the sunshine. It suited them well, for they expanded into one of the finest races in Christendom, and certainly one of the least Christian races there, a solid, well-tempered race, self-controlled and self-respecting. The Venetian genius is the genius of sensuous enjoyment, of tolerant humanity, of unashamed earthliness. What-

ever was sane and stable in Casanova, and his instinctive distaste for the morbid and perverse, he owes to his Venetian maternal ancestry. If it is true that he was not a mere sensualist, it was by no means because of his devotion to duty—"when I had any,"—but because the genuine sensualist is only alive on the passive side of his nature, and in Casanova's nervous system the development of the sensory fibres is compensated and held in balance by the equal vigour of the motor fibres ; what he is quick to enjoy he is strong and alert to achieve. Thus he lived the full and varied life that he created for himself at his own good pleasure out of nothing, by the sole power of his own magnificent wits. And now the self-sufficing Venetian sits down to survey his work and finds that it is good. It has not always been found so since. A "self-made" man, if ever there was one, Casanova is not beloved of those who worship self-help. The record of his life will easily outlive the largest fortune ever made in any counting house, but the life itself remains what we call a "wasted" life. Thrift, prudence, modesty, scrupulous integrity, strict attention to business—it is useless to come to Casanova for any of these virtues. They were not even in his blood ; he was only half Venetian.

The Casanova family was originally Spanish. The first Casanova on record was a certain Don Jacobo, of illegitimate birth, who in the middle of the fifteenth century became secretary to King Alfonso. He fell in love with Doña Anna Palafox, who was destined to the religious life, and the day after she had pronounced her vows he carried her off from her convent to Rome, where he finally obtained the forgiveness and benediction of the Pope. The son of this union, Don Juan, killed an officer of the King of Naples, fled from Rome, and sought fortune with Columbus, dying on the voyage. Don Juan's son, Marcantonio, secretary to a cardinal, was noted in his day as an epigrammatic poet ; but his satire was too keen, and he also had to flee from Rome. His son became a colonel, but, unlike his forefathers, he died peacefully, in extreme old age, in France. In this soldier's grandson, Casanova's father, the adventurous impulsiveness of the family again came out ; he ran away from home at nineteen with a young actress, and himself became an actor ; subsequently he left the actress and then fell in love with a young Venetian beauty of sixteen, Zanetta Farusi, a shoemaker's daughter. But a mere actor could find no favour in a respectable family, so the young couple ran away and were married ; the hero of these "Mémoires," born on the 2nd April, 1725, was their first-born. There is probably no reason to doubt the substantial accuracy of this family history, but if one desired to invent an ancestry for Casanova one could scarcely better it.

His race helps to account for Casanova, but the real explanation of the

man can only lie in his own congenital organization. That he was a radically abnormal person is fairly clear. Not that he was morbid either in body or mind. On the contrary, he was a man of fine presence, of abounding health—always looking ten years younger than his age—of the most robust appetites, a great eater, who delighted to see others, especially women, eat heartily also, a man of indubitable sexual vigour; however great the demands he made upon his physical energy it seldom failed to respond, and his capacity for rest was equally great; he could sleep nineteen hours at a stretch. His mental health was not less sound. The most punctilious alienist, with this frank and copious history before him, could not commit Casanova to an asylum. Whatever offences against social codes he may have committed, Casanova can scarcely be said to have sinned against natural laws. He was only abnormal because so natural a person within the gates of civilization is necessarily abnormal and at war with his environment. Far from being the victim of morbidities and perversities, Casanova presents to us the natural man *in excelsis*. He was a man for whom the external world existed, and who reacted to all the stimuli it presents to the healthy normal organism. His intelligence was immensely keen and alert, his resourcefulness, his sagacious audacity, his presence of mind, were all of the first order. He was equally swift to feel, to conceive, and to act. His mental organization was thus singularly harmonious, and hence his success in gratifying his eager and immense appetite for the world, an appetite unsatiated and insatiable even to the last, or he would have found no pleasure in writing these "Mémoires." Casanova has been described as a psychological type of instability. That is to view him superficially. A man who adapts himself so readily and so effectively to any change in his environment or in his desires only exhibits the instability which marks the most intensely vital protoplasm. The energy and ability which Casanova displayed in gratifying his instincts would have sufficed to make a reputation of the first importance in any department, as a popular statesman, a great judge, a merchant prince, and enabled him to die worn out by the monotonous and feverish toil of the senate, the court, or the counting-house. Casanova chose to *live*. A crude and barbarous choice, it seems to us with our hereditary instinct to spend our lives in wasting the reasons for living. But it is certain that Casanova never repented his choice. Assuredly we need not, for few judges, statesmen, or merchants have ever left for the joy of humanity any legacy of their toil equal to these "Mémoires."

But such swift energy of vital action and reaction, such ardour of deed in keeping pace with desire, are in themselves scarcely normal. Casanova's

abnormality is suggested by the tendency to abnormality which we find in his family. We have seen what men his ancestors were; in reading the "Mémoires" we gather incidentally that one of his brothers had married, though impotent, and another brother is described as a somewhat feeble-minded ne'er-do-well. All the physical and mental potency of the family was intensely concentrated in Casanova. Yet he himself in early childhood seems to have been little better than an idiot either in body or mind. He could recall nothing that happened before he was eight years of age. He was not expected to live; he suffered from prolonged hæmorrhages from the nose, and the vision of blood was his earliest memory. He habitually kept his mouth open, and his face was stupid. "Thickness of the blood," said the physicians of those days; it seems probable that he suffered from growths in the nose which, as we now know, produce such physical and mental inferiority as Casanova describes. The cure was spontaneous. He was taken to Padua, and shortly afterwards began to develop wonderfully both in stature and intelligence. In after years he had little cause to complain either of health or intellect. It is notable, however, that when, still a boy, he commenced his ecclesiastical training (against his wishes, for he had chosen to be a doctor) he failed miserably as a preacher, and broke down in the pulpit; thus the Church lost a strange ornament. Moreover, with all his swift sensation and alert response, there was in Casanova an anomalous dullness of moral sensibility. The insults to Holy Religion which seem to have brought him to that prison from which he effected his marvellous escape, were scarcely the serious protests of a convinced heretic; his deliberate trickery of Mme. d'Urfé was not only criminal but cruel. His sense of the bonds of society was always somewhat veiled, and although the veil never became thick, and might be called the natural result of an adventurer's life, it might also, perhaps, be said that it was a certain degree of what is sometimes called moral imbecility that made Casanova an adventurer. But while we thus have to recognize that he was a man of dulled moral sensibility, we must also recognize that he possessed a vigorous moral consciousness of his own, or we misunderstand him altogether. The point to be remembered is that the threshold of his moral sensibility was not easily reached. There are some people whose tactile sensibility is so obtuse that it requires a very wide separation of the æsthesiometer to get the right response. It was so with Casanova's moral sensitiveness. But, once aroused, his conscience responded energetically enough. It seems doubtful whether, from his own point of view, he ever fell into grave sin, and therefore he is happily free from remorse. No great credit is thus due to him; the same

psychological characteristic is familiar in all criminals. It is not difficult to avoid plucking the apples of shame when so singularly few grow on your tree.

Casanova's moral sensibility and its limits come out, where a man's moral sensibility will come out, in his relations with women. As in the life of the natural man generally, women played a large part in Casanova's life. He was always in love. We may use the word "love" here in no euphemistic sense, for although Casanova's passions grew and ripened with the rapidity born of long experience in these matters, so great is the fresh vitality of the man that there is ever a virginal bloom on every new ardour. He was as far removed from the cold-blooded libertine typified in Laclos's Valmont, unscrupulously using women as the instruments of his own lust, as from Laura's sonneteering lover. He had fully grasped what the latest writer on the scientific psychology of sex calls the secondary law of courting, namely, the development in the male of an imaginative attentiveness to the psychical and bodily states of the female, in place of an exclusive attentiveness to his own gratification. It is not impossible that in these matters Casanova could have given a lesson to many virtuous husbands of our own highly moral century. He never sank to the level of the vulgar maxim that "all's fair in love and war." He sought his pleasure in the pleasure, and not in the complaisance, of the women he loved, and they seem to have gratefully and tenderly recognized his skill in the art of love-making. Casanova loved many women, but broke few hearts. The same women appear again and again through his pages, and for the most part no lapse of years seems to deaden the gladness with which he goes forth to meet them anew. That he knew himself well enough never to take either wife or mistress must be counted as a virtue, such as it was, in this incomparable lover of so many women. A man of finer moral fibre could scarcely have loved so many women; a man of coarser fibre could never have left so many women happy.

This very lack of moral delicacy which shuts Casanova off from the finest human development is an advantage to the autobiographer. It insures his sincerity because he is unconscious of offence; it saves us from any wearisome self-justification, because, for all his amused self-criticism, he sees no real need for justification. In Rousseau's "Confessions" we hear the passionate pleader against men at the tribunal of God; here we are conscious neither of opponent nor tribunal. Casanova is neither a pillar of society nor yet one of the moral Samsons who delight to pull down the pillars of society he has taken the world as it is, and he has taken himself as he is, and he has

enjoyed them both hugely. So he is free to set forth the whole of himself, his achievements, his audacities, his failures, his little weaknesses and superstitions, his amours, his quarrels, his good fortune and his bad fortune in the world that on the whole he has found so interesting and happy a place to dwell in. And his book remains an unending source of delightful study of the man of impulse and action in all his moods. The self-reliant man, immensely apt for enjoyment, who plants himself solidly with his single keen wit before the mighty oyster of the world has never revealed himself so clearly before.

What manner of man Casanova seemed to his contemporaries has only been discovered of recent years; and while the picture which we obtain of him has been furnished by his enemies, and was not meant to flatter, it admirably supports the "Mémoires." In 1755 a spy of the Venetian Inquisition reported that Casanova united impiety, imposture, and wantonness to a degree that inspired horror. It was in that same year that Casanova was arrested, chiefly on the charge of contempt for Holy Religion, and sentenced to five years imprisonment. Fifteen months later he had effected his famous escape, and was able to pursue his career as an assured and accomplished adventurer who had brilliantly completed his apprenticeship. It is not until many years later, in 1772, when his long efforts to obtain pardon from his country still remained unsuccessful, that we obtain an admirable picture of him from the Venetian agent at Ancona. "He comes and goes where he will," the agent reports, "with open face and haughty mien, always well equipped. He is a man of some forty years at most [really about forty-eight, thus confirming Casanova's statement that he was always taken for some ten years younger than his years], of lofty stature, of fine and vigorous aspect, with bright eyes and very brown skin. He wears a short chestnut-coloured peruke. I am told that his character is bold and disdainful, but especially that he is full of speech, and of witty and well-instructed speech." Two years later Casanova was at last permitted to return to Venice. He there accepted the post of secret agent of the State Inquisition for service within the city. Like Defoe and Toland, who were also secret political agents, he attempted to justify himself on grounds of public duty. In a few years, however, he was dismissed, perhaps, as Baschet suggests, on account of the fact that his reports contained too much philosophy and not enough espionage; probably it was realized that a man of such powerful individuality and independence was not fitted for servile uses. Finally, in 1782, he was banished from Venice for an offence to which the blood of the Casanovas had always been easily inclined—he published an audacious satire against a patrician. From Venice he went to

Trieste, and thence to Vienna. There he met Count Waldstein, a fervent adept of Kabbalistic science, a subject in which Casanova himself was proficient ; he had found it useful in certain dealings with credulous people. In 1784 the count offered him the post of librarian, with a salary of one thousand florins, at his castle of Dux, near Teplitz, in Bohemia. It is said to be a fine castle, and is still noted for its charming park. Here this prince of Bohemians spent the remainder of his life, devoting seven years to the "Mémoires," on which he was still engaged at his death. A terra-cotta bust discovered at the castle (and etched some years ago for "Le Livre") shows him in mature age, a handsome, energetic, and imposing head, with somewhat deep-set eyes ; it is by no means the head of a scamp, but rather that of a philosopher, a philosopher with unusual experience of affairs, a successful statesman, one might say. A medallion portrait, of later date, which has also been reproduced, shows him at the age of sixty-three with lean, eager face, and lofty, though receding forehead, the type of the man of quick perception and swift action, the eagle type of man. The Prince de Ligne has also left a description of him as he appeared in old age, now grown very irritable, ready to flare up at any imagined insult, engaged in perpetual warfare with domestics, but receiving the highest consideration from those who knew how to appreciate the great qualities of the man and his unequalled experiences, and who knew also how to indulge his susceptibilities and smile at his antique fashions. Once he went off in a huff to Weimar, and was graciously received by the Duke, but he soon came back again ; all the favours there were showered on a certain court favourite, one Goethe. It is clear, as we read the Prince de Ligne's detailed description, that the restless old adventurer had need, even in the peaceful seclusion of Dux, of all the consolation yielded by Socrates, Horace, Seneca, and Boethius, his favourite philosophers. Here, at Dux, on the 4th of June, 1798, Casanova died, at the age of sixty-eight. "Bear witness that I have lived as a philosopher and die as a Christian ;" that, we are told, was his last utterance after he had taken the sacraments.

From that moment Casanova and everything that concerned him was covered by a pall of oblivion. He seems to have been carelessly cast aside, together with the century of which he was so characteristic, and, as it now appears, so memorable a child. The world in which he had lived so joyously and completely had been transformed by the Revolution. The new age of strenuous commercialism and complacent philosophy was in its vigorous youth, a sword in its right hand and a Bible in its left. The only adventurer who found favour now was he who took the glad news of salvation to the

heathen, or mowed them down to make new openings for trade. Had he been born later, we may be well assured, Casanova would have known how to play his part; he would not have fallen short of Borrow, who became an agent of the Bible Society. But as it was, what had the new age to do with Casanova? No one cared, no one even yet has cared, so much as to examine the drawers and cupboards full of papers which he left behind at Dux. Only on the 13th of February, 1820, was the oblivion a little stirred. On that date a certain Carlo Angiolieri appeared at Leipzig in the office of the famous publisher, Brockhaus, bearing a voluminous manuscript in the handwriting (as we now know) of Casanova, and bearing the title, "Histoire de ma Vie jusqu'à l'an 1797."

But even the appearance of Carlo Angiolieri failed to dissipate the gloom. Fifty years more were to pass before the figure of Casanova again became clear. This man, so ardently alive in every fibre, had now become a myth. The sagacious world—which imparts the largest dole of contempt to the pilgrim who brings back to it the largest gifts—refused to take Casanova seriously. The shrewd critic wondered who wrote Casanova, just as he has since wondered who wrote Shakespeare. Paul Lacroix paid Stendhal the huge compliment of suggesting that he had written the "Mémoires," a sufficiently ingenious suggestion, for in Stendhal's Dauphiny spirit there is something of that love of adventure which is supremely illustrated in Casanova. But we now know that, as Armand Baschet first proved, Casanova himself really wrote his own "Mémoires." Moreover, so far as investigation has yet been able to go, he wrote with strict regard to truth. Wherever it is possible to test Casanova, his essential veracity has always been vindicated. In the nature of things it is impossible to verify much that he narrates. When, however, we remember that he was telling the story of his life primarily for his own pleasure, it is clear that he had no motive for deception; and when we consider the surpassingly discreditable episodes which he has recorded, we may recall that he has given not indeed positive proof of sincerity, but certainly the best that can be given in the absence of direct proof. It remains a question how far a man is able to recollect the details of the far past—the conversations he held, the garments he wore, the meals he ate—so precisely as Casanova professes to recollect them. This is a psychological problem which has not yet been experimentally examined. There are, however, great individual differences in memory, and there is reason to believe that an organization, such as Casanova's, for which the external world is so vivid, is associated with memory-power of high quality.

That this history is narrated with absolute precision of detail Casanova himself would probably not have asserted. But there is no reason to doubt his good faith, and there is excellent reason to accept the substantial accuracy of his narrative. It remains a personal document of a value which will increase rather than diminish as time goes by. It is one of the great autobiographical revelations which the ages have left us, with Augustine's, Cellini's, Rousseau's, of its own kind supreme.

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