MEMOIRS OF JACQUES CASANOVA de SEINGALT 1725-1798 VENETIAN YEARS, Volume 1e--MILAN AND MANTUA

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MILAN AND MANTUA

CHAPTER XX

Slight Misfortunes Compel Me to Leave Venice--My Adventures in Milan and Mantua

On Low Sunday Charles paid us a visit with his lovely wife, who seemed totally indifferent to what Christine used to be. Her hair dressed with powder did not please me as well as the raven black of her beautiful locks, and her fashionable town attire did not, in my eyes, suit her as well as her rich country dress. But the countenances of husband and wife bore the stamp of happiness.Charles reproached me in a friendly manner because I had not called once upon them, and, in order to atone for my apparent negligence, I went to see them the next day with M. Dandolo. Charles told me that his wife was idolized by his aunt and his sister who had become her bosom

friend; that she was kind, affectionate, unassuming, and of a disposition which enforced affection. I was no less pleased with this favourable state of things than with the facility with which Christine was learning the Venetian dialect.

When M. Dandolo and I called at their house, Charles was not at home;Christine was alone with his two relatives. The most friendly welcome was proffered to us, and in the course of conversation the aunt praised the progress made by Christine in her writing very highly, and asked her to let me see her copy-book. I followed her to the next room, where she told me that she was very happy; that every day she discovered new virtues in her husband. He had told her,without the slightest appearance of suspicion of displeasure, that he knew that we had spent two days together in Treviso, and that he had laughed at the well-meaning fool who had given him that piece of information

in the hope of raising a cloud in the heaven of their felicity.

Charles was truly endowed with all the virtues, with all the noble qualities of an honest and distinguished man. Twenty-six years afterwards I happened to require the assistance of his purse, and found him my true friend. I never was a frequent visitor at his house, and he appreciated my delicacy. He died a few months before my last departure from Venice, leaving his widow in easy circumstances, and three well-educated sons, all with good positions,who may, for what I know, be still living with their mother.

In June I went to the fair at Padua, and made the acquaintance of a young man of my own age, who was then studying mathematics under the celebrated Professor Succi. His name was Tognolo, but thinking it did not sound well, he changed it for that of Fabris. He became,

in after years, Comte de Fabris, lieutenant-general under Joseph II.,and died Governor of Transylvania. This man, who owed his high fortune to his talents, would, perhaps, have lived and died unknown if he had kept his name of Tognolo, a truly vulgar one. He was from Uderzo, a large village of the Venetian Friuli. He had a brother in the Church, a man of parts, and a great gamester, who, having a deep knowledge of the world, had taken the name of Fabris, and the younger brother had to assume it likewise. Soon afterwards he bought an estate with the title of count, became a Venetian nobleman, and his origin as a country bumpkin was forgotten. If he had kept his name of Tognolo it would have injured him, for he could not have pronounced it without reminding his hearers of what is called, by the most contemptible of prejudices, low extraction, and the privileged class, through an absurd error, does not admit the possibility of a peasant having talent or genius. No doubt a time will come when

society, more enlightened, and therefore more reasonable, will acknowledge that noble feelings, honour, and heroism can be found in every condition of life as easily as in a class, the blood of which is not always exempt from the taint of a misalliance.

The new count, while he allowed others to forget his origin, was too wise to forget it himself, and in legal documents he always signed his family name as well as the one he had adopted. His brother had offered him two ways to win fortune in the world, leaving him perfectly free in his choice. Both required an expenditure of one thousand sequins, but the abbe had put the amount aside for that purpose. My friend had to choose between the sword of Mars and the bird of Minerva. The abbe knew that he could purchase for his brother a company in the army of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty,or obtain for him a professorship at the University of Padua; for money

can do everything. But my friend, who was gifted with noble feelings and good sense, knew that in either profession talents and knowledge were essentials, and before making a choice he was applying himself with great success to the study of mathematics. He utlimately decided upon the military profession, thus imitating Achilles, who preferred the sword to the distaff, and he paid for it with his life like the son of Peleus; though not so young, and not through a wound inflicted by an arrow, but from the plague, which he caught in the unhappy country in which the indolence of Europe allows the Turks to perpetuate that fearful disease.

The distinguished appearance, the noble sentiments, the great knowledge, and the talents of Fabris would have been turned into ridicule in a man called Tognolo, for such is the force of prejudices, particularly of those which have no ground to rest upon,that an ill-sounding name is

degrading in this our stupid society.My opinion is that men who have an ill-sounding name, or one which presents an indecent or ridiculous idea, are right in changing it if they intend to win honour, fame, and fortune either in arts or sciences. No one can reasonably deny them that right, provided the name they assume belongs to nobody. The alphabet is general property, and everyone has the right to use it for the creation of a word forming an appellative sound. But he must truly create it.Voltaire, in spite of his genius, would not perhaps have reached posterity under his name of Arouet, especially amongst the French,who always give way so easily to their keen sense of ridicule and equivocation. How could they have imagined that a writer 'a rouet' could be a man of genius? And D'Alembert, would he have attained his high fame, his universal reputation, if he had been satisfied with his name of M. Le Rond, or Mr. Allround? What would have become of Metastasio under his true name of

Trapasso? What impression would Melanchthon have made with his name of Schwarzerd? Would he then have dared to raise the voice of a moralist philosopher, of a reformer of the Eucharist, and so many other holy things? Would not M. de Beauharnais have caused some persons to laugh and others to blush if he had kept his name of Beauvit, even if the first founder of his family had been indebted for his fortune to the fine quality expressed by that name?

Would the Bourbeux have made as good a figure on the throne as the Bourbons? I think that King Poniatowski ought to have abdicated the name of Augustus, which he had taken at the time of his accession to the throne, when he abdicated royalty. The Coleoni of Bergamo,however, would find it rather difficult to change their name, because they would be compelled at the same time to change their coat of arms (the two generative glands), and thus to

annihilate the glory of their ancestor, the hero Bartholomeo.

Towards the end of autumn my friend Fabris introduced me to a family in the midst of which the mind and the heart could find delicious food. That family resided in the country on the road to Zero. Cardplaying, lovemaking, and practical jokes were the order of the day.Some of those jokes were rather severe ones, but the order of the day was never to get angry and to laugh at everything, for one was to take every jest pleasantly or be thought a bore. Bedsteads would at night tumble down under their occupants, ghosts were personated,diuretic pills or sugar-plums were given to young ladies, as well as comfits who produced certain winds rising from the netherlands, and impossible to keep under control. These jokes would sometimes go rather too far, but such was the spirit animating all the members of that circle;

they would laugh. I was not less inured than the others to the war of offence and defence, but at last there was such a bitter joke played upon me that it suggested to me another, the fatal consequences of which put a stop to the mania by which we were all possessed.

We were in the habit of walking to a farm which was about half a league distant by the road, but the distance could be reduced by half by going over a deep and miry ditch across which a narrow plank was thrown, and I always insisted upon going that way, in spite of the fright of the ladies who always trembled on the narrow bridge,although I never failed to cross the first, and to offer my hand to help them over. One fine day, I crossed first so as to give them courage, but suddenly, when I reached the middle of the plank, it gave way under me, and there I was in the ditch, up to the chin in stinking mud, and, in spite of my inward rage, obliged, according to the

general understanding, to join in the merry laughter of all my compan But the merriment did not last long, for the joke was too bad, and everyone declared it to be so. Some peasants were called to the rescue, and with much difficulty they dragged me out in the most awful state. An entirely new dress, embroidered with spangles, my silk stockings, my lace, everything, was of course spoiled, but not minding it, I laughed more heartily that anybody else, although I had already made an inward vow to have the mst cruel revenge. In order to know the author of that bitter joke I had only to appear calm and indifferent about it. It was evident that the plank had been purposely sawn. I was taken back to the house, a shirt, a coat, a complete costume, were lent me, for I had come that time only for twenty-four hours, and had not brought anything with me. I went to the city the next morning, and towards the evening I returned to the gay company. Fabris, who had been as angry as myself, observed to me that the

perpetrator of the joke evidently felt his guilt, because he took good care not to discover himself.But I unveiled the mystery by promising one sequin to a peasant woman if she could find out who had sawn the plank. She contrived to discover the young man who had done the work. I called on him, and the offer of a sequin, together with my threats, compelled him to

confess that he had been paid for his work by Signor Demetrio, a Greek, dealer in spices, a good and amiable man of between forty-five and fifty years, on whom I never played any trick, except in the case of a pretty, young servant girl whom he was courting, and whom I had juggled from him.

Satisfied with my discovery, I was racking my brain to invent a good practical joke, but to obtain complete revenge it was necessary that my trick should prove worse

than the one he had played upon me.Unfortunately my imagination was at bay. I could not find anything.A funeral put an end to my difficulties.

Armed with my hunting-knife, I went alone to the cemetery a little after midnight, and opening the grave of the dead man who had been buried that very day, I cut off one of the arms near the shoulder,not without some trouble, and after I had re-buried the corpse, I returned to my room with the arm of the defunct. The next day, when supper was over, I left the table and retired to my chamber as if I intended to go to bed, but taking the arm with me I hid myself under Demetrio's bed. A short time after, the Greek comes in, undresses himself, put his light out, and lies down. I give him time to fall nearly asleep; then, placing myself at the foot of the bed, I pull away the clothes little by little until he is half naked. He laughs and calls out,

"Whoever you may be, go away and let me sleep quietly, for I do not believe in ghosts;" he covers himself again and composes himself to sleep.

I wait five or six minutes, and pull again at the bedclothes; but when he tries to draw up the sheet, saying that he does not care for ghosts, I oppose some resistance. He sits up so as to catch the hand which is pulling at the clothes, and I take care that he should get hold of the dead hand. Confident that he has caught the man or the woman who was playing the trick, he pulls it towards him, laughing all the time; I keep tight hold of the arm for a few instants, and then let it go suddenly; the Greek falls back on his pillow without uttering a single word.

The trick was played, I leave the room without any noise, and,reaching my chamber, go to bed.

I was fast asleep, when towards morning I was awoke by persons going about, and not understanding why they should be up so early, I got up. The first person I met--the mistress of the house--told m that I had played an abominable joke.

"I? What have I done?"

"M. Demetrio is dying."

"Have I killed him?"

She went away without answering me. I dressed myself, rather frightened, I confess, but determined upon pleading coplete ignorance of everyt hing, and I proceeded to Demetrio's room; and I was confronted with horror-stricken countenances and bitter reproaches. I found all