

GIACOMO CASANOVA

Chevalier de Seingalt

HISTORY OF MY LIFE

FIRST TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH IN ACCORDANCE
WITH THE ORIGINAL FRENCH MANUSCRIPT

by Willard R. Trask

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CHAPTER IX

My blunders in French, my successes, my numerous acquaintances. Louis XV. My brother comes to Paris.

ALL THE Italian actors in Paris wanted to show me how lavishly they lived. They invited me to meals, they entertained me. Carlino Bertinazzi,¹ who played Arlecchino, and whom everyone in Paris adored, reminded me that he had seen me at Padua thirteen years earlier, when he had come from Petersburg with my mother. He gave me a fine dinner in the house of Madame de La Caillerie,² where he was lodging. The lady was in love with him. She had four children, who fluttered about the house; I complimented her husband on their childish charm, and her husband replied that they were Carlino's.

"That may be so, but in the meanwhile it is you who take care of them, and it is you whom they should recognize as their father, whose name they will bear."

"Yes, that would be so in law; but Carlino is too decent a man not to look after them when I take it into my head to get rid of them. He knows very well that they are his, and my wife would be the first to complain if he did not admit it."

"I thought, Monsieur, that the *vi* should be put in front."

"No, Mademoiselle, we put it *derrière*" ("behind").⁶²

Monsieur and Madame are dying with laughter, the young lady smiling, and I speechless and in despair at having made so gross a blunder; but it was done. I take up a book, sulking and wishing in vain that their laughter would end; but it lasted more than a week. My shameless *double-entendre* spread all over Paris and made me furious; but I at last learned the power of words and for the time being my credit diminished. Crébillon, after laughing heartily, told me that I should have said *après* instead of *derrière*. But if the French laughed over the mistakes I made in speaking their language, I took my revenge by pointing out some absurd usages of theirs.

"Monsieur," I ask, "how is Madame your wife?"

"You do her great honor."

"Her honor has nothing to do with it; I am asking after her health."

A young man in the Bois de Boulogne falls from his horse; I run to pick him up, but he is on his feet and full of life.

"Have you come to any harm?"

"On the contrary, Monsieur."

"Then I take it the fall did you good."

I am calling on Madame la Présidente Charon⁶³ for the first time; her nephew makes a brilliant entrance; she presents me and tells him my name and country.

"What! You are an Italian, Monsieur? On my word, you make such a good appearance that I would have wagered you were French."

"Monsieur, when I saw you I very nearly fell into the same error—I would have wagered that you were Italian."

"I did not know that I looked Italian."

I was at table at Lady Lambert's,⁶⁴ someone remarked

on a cornelian I had on my finger on which the head of Louis XV was engraved to perfection. My ring makes the round of the table, everyone finds the likeness striking; a young Marquise hands me back the ring, saying:

"Is it really an antique?"

"You mean the stone? Yes, Madame, it is."

Everyone laughs, and the Marquise, who had the reputation of being intelligent, does not see fit to ask why people are laughing. After dinner the conversation turns to the rhinoceros which was being shown at the fair at Saint-Germain⁶⁵ for twenty-four sous a head. "Let us go see it, let us go see it!" We get into a carriage, stop at the fair, and take several turns through the walks, looking for the one in which the rhinoceros was. I was the only man, I had a lady on either arm, the intelligent Marquise was preceding us. At the end of the walk where we had been told the animal was, its master was sitting at the gate to take their money from people who wished to go in. It is true that he was dressed in African costume, enormously fat, and looked like a monster; but the Marquise ought at least to have recognized that he was a man. Not a bit of it.

"Are you the rhinoceros, Monsieur?"

"Step in, Madame, step in."

She sees us choking with laughter, and, seeing the real rhinoceros, she feels obliged to apologize to the African, assuring him that she had never in her life seen a rhinoceros and so he must not be offended if she had made a mistake.

In the greenroom of the Comédie Italienne, where during the intermissions the greatest noblemen are to be found, for they go there to get warm in winter and at all seasons to amuse themselves by talking with the actresses who sit there waiting for their turns in the parts they are playing, I was sitting beside Camilla, Corallina's sister, keeping her laughing by flirting with her. A young councilor, who did not like my monopolizing her atten-