

GIACOMO CASANOVA

THE MEMOIRS OF
JACQUES CASANOVA DE
SEINGALT, 1725-1798.

VOLUME 15: WITH
VOLTAIRE

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Casanova G.

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CHAPTER XIX

M. de Voltaire; My Discussions with That Great Man—Ariosto—The Duc de Villars—The Syndic and the Three Girls—Dispute with Voltaire—Aix-en-Savoie—The Marquis Desarmoises

"M. de Voltaire," said I, "this is the happiest moment of my life. I have been your pupil for twenty years, and my heart is full of joy to see my master."

"Honour me with your attendance on my course for twenty years more, and promise me that you will bring me my fees at the end of that time."

"Certainly, if you promise to wait for me."

This Voltairean sally made all present laugh, as was to be expected, for those who laugh keep one party in countenance at the other's expense, and the side which has the laughter is sure to win; this is the rule of good society.

I was not taken by surprise, and waited to have my revenge.

Just then two Englishmen came in and were presented to him.

"These gentlemen are English," said Voltaire; "I wish I were."

I thought the compliment false and out of place; for the gentlemen were obliged to reply out of politeness that they wished they had been French, or if they did not care to tell a lie they would be too confused to tell the truth. I believe every man of honour should put his own nation first.

A moment after, Voltaire turned to me again and said that as I was a Venetian I must know Count Algarotti.

"I know him, but not because I am a Venetian, as seven-eighths of my dear countrymen are not even aware of his existence."

"I should have said, as a man of letters."

"I know him from having spent two months with him at Padua, seven years ago, and what particularly attracted my attention was the admiration he professed for M. de Voltaire."

"That is flattering for me, but he has no need of admiring anyone."

"If Algarotti had not begun by admiring others, he would never have made a name for himself. As an admirer of Newton he endeavoured to teach the ladies to discuss the theory of light."

"Has he succeeded?"

"Not as well as M. de Fontenelle in his 'Plurality of Worlds;' however, one may say he has succeeded."

"True. If you see him at Bologna, tell him I am expecting to hear from him about Russia. He can address my letters to my banker, Bianchi, at Milan, and they will be sent on to me."

"I will not fail to do so if I see him."

"I have heard that the Italians do not care for his style."

"No; all that he writes is full of French idioms. His style is wretched."

"But do not these French turns increase the beauty of your language?"

"They make it insufferable, as French would be mixed with Italian or German even though it were written by M. de Voltaire."

"You are right; every language should preserve its purity. Livy has been criticised on this account; his Latin is said to be tainted with patavinity."

"When I began to learn Latin, the Abbe Lazzarini told me he preferred Livy to Sallust."

"The Abbe Lazzarini, author of the tragedy, 'Ulisse il giovine'? You must have been very young; I wish I had known him. But I knew the Abbe Conti well; the same that was Newton's friend, and whose four tragedies contain the whole of Roman history."

"I also knew and admired him. I was young, but I congratulated myself on being admitted into the society of these great men. It seems as if it were yesterday, though it is many years ago; and now in your presence my inferiority does not humiliate me. I wish to be the younger son of all humanity."

"Better so than to be the chief and eldest. May I ask you to what branch of literature you have devoted yourself?"

"To none; but that, perhaps, will come afterwards. In the meantime I read as much as I can, and try to study character on my travels."

"That is the way to become learned, but the book of humanity is too vast. Reading a history is the easier way."

"Yes, if history did not lie. One is not sure of the truth of the facts. It is tiring, while the study of the world is amusing. Horace, whom I know by heart, is my guide-book."

"Algarotti, too, is very fond of Horace. Of course you are fond of poetry?"

"It is my passion."

"Have you made many sonnets?"

"Ten or twelve I like, and two or three thousand which in all probability I have not read twice."

"The Italians are mad after sonnets."

"Yes; if one can call it a madness to desire to put thought into measured harmony. The sonnet is difficult because the thought has to be fitted exactly into the fourteen lines."

"It is Procrustes' bed, and that's the reason you have so few good ones. As for us, we have not one; but that is the fault of our language."

"And of the French genius, which considers that a thought when extended loses all its force."

"And you do not think so?"

"Pardon me, it depends on the kind of thought. A witty saying, for example, will not make a sonnet; in French or Italian it belongs to the domain of epigram."

"What Italian poet do you like best?"

"Ariosto; but I cannot say I love him better than the others, for he is my only love."

"You know the others, though?"

"I think I have read them all, but all their lights pale before Ariosto's. Fifteen years ago I read all you have written against him, and I said that you, would retract when you had read his works."

"I am obliged to you for thinking that I had not read them. As a matter of fact I had done so, but I was young. I knew Italian very imperfectly, and being prejudiced by the learned Italians who adore Tasso I was unfortunate enough to publish a criticism of Ariosto which I thought my own, while it was only the echo of those who had prejudiced me. I adore your Ariosto!"

"Ah! M. de Voltaire, I breathe again. But be good enough to have the work in which you turned this great man into ridicule excommunicated."

"What use would that be? All my books are excommunicated; but I will give you a good proof of my retractation."

I was astonished! The great man began to recite the two fine passages from the thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth cantos, in which the divine poet speaks of the conversation of Astolpho with St. John and he did it without missing a single life or committing the slightest fault against the laws of prosody. He then pointed out the beauties of the passages with his natural insight and with a great man's genius. I could not have had anything better from the lips of the most skilled commentators in Italy. I listened to him with the greatest attention, hardly daring to breath, and waiting for him to make a mistake,

but I had my trouble for nothing. I turned to the company crying that I was more than astonished, and that all Italy should know what I had seen. "And I, sir," said the great man, "will let all Europe know of the amends I owe to the greatest genius our continent has produced."

Greedy of the praise which he deserved so well, Voltaire gave me the next day his translation which Ariosto begins thus:

"Quindi avvien the tra principi a signori."

At the end of the recitation which gained the applause of all who heard it, although not one of them knew Italian, Madame Denis, his niece, asked me if I thought the passage her uncle had just recited one of the finest the poet had written.

"Yes, but not the finest."

"It ought to be; for without it Signor Lodovico would not have gained his apotheosis."

"He has been canonised, then? I was not aware of that."

At these words the laugh, headed by Voltaire, went for Madame Denis. Everybody laughed except myself, and I continued to look perfectly serious.

Voltaire was vexed at not seeing me laugh like the rest, and asked me the reason.

"Are you thinking," said he, "of some more than human passage?"

"Yes," I answered.

"What passage is that?"

"The last thirty-six stanzas of the twenty-third canto, where the poet describes in detail how Roland became mad. Since the world has existed no one has discovered the springs of madness, unless Ariosto himself, who became mad in his old age. These stanzas are terrible, and I am sure they must have made you tremble."

"Yes, I remember they render love dreadful. I long to read them again."

"Perhaps the gentleman will be good enough to recite them," said Madame Denis, with a side-glance at her uncle.

"Willingly," said I, "if you will have the goodness to listen to me."

"You have learn them by heart, then, have you?" said Voltaire.

"Yes, it was a pleasure and no trouble. Since I was sixteen, I have read over Ariosto two or three times every year; it is my passion, and the lines naturally become linked in my memory without my having given myself any pains to learn them. I know it all, except his long genealogies and his historical tirades, which fatigue the mind and do not touch the heart. It is only Horace that I know throughout, in spite of the often prosaic style of his epistles, which are certainly far from equalling Boileau's."

"Boileau is often too lengthy; I admire Horace, but as for Ariosto, with his forty long cantos, there is too much of him."

"It is fifty-one cantos, M. de Voltaire."

The great man was silent, but Madame Denis was equal to the occasion.

"Come, come," said she, "let us hear the thirty-six stanzas which earned the author the title of divine, and which are to make us tremble."

I then began, in an assured voice, but not in that monotonous tone adopted by the Italians, with which the French so justly reproach us. The French would be the best reciters if they were not constrained by the rhyme, for they say what they feel better than any other people. They have neither the passionate monotonous tone of my fellow-countrymen, nor the sentimentality of the Germans, nor the fatiguing mannerisms of the English; to every period they give its proper expression, but the recurrence of the same sounds partly spoils their recitation. I recited the fine verses of Ariosto, as if it had been rhythmic prose, animating it by the sound of my voice and the movements of my eyes, and by modulating my intonation according to the sentiments with which I wished to inspire my audience. They saw how hardly I could restrain my tears, and every eye was wet; but when I came to the stanza,

"Poiche allargare il freno al dolor puote,
Che resta solo senza altrui rispetto,
Giu dagli occhi rigando per le gote
Sparge un fiume de lacrime sul petto,"

my tears coursed down my cheeks to such an extent that everyone began to sob. M. de Voltaire and Madame Denis threw their arms round my neck, but their embraces could not stop me, for Roland, to become mad, had to notice that he was in the same bed in which Angelica had lately been found in the arms of the too fortunate Medor, and I had to reach the next stanza. For my voice of sorrow and wailing I substituted the expression of that terror which arose naturally from the contemplation of his fury, which was in its effects like a tempest, a volcano, or an earthquake.

When I had finished I received with a sad air the congratulations of the audience. Voltaire cried, "I always said so; the secret of drawing tears is to weep one's self, but they must be real tears, and to shed them the heart must be stirred to its depths. I am obliged to you, sir," he added, embracing me, "and I promise to recite the same stanzas myself to-morrow, and to weep like you."

He kept his word.

"It is astonishing," said Madame Denis, "that intolerant Rome should not have condemned the song of Roland."

"Far from it," said Voltaire, "Leo X. excommunicated whoever should dare to condemn it. The two great families of Este and Medici interested themselves in the poet's favour. Without that protection it is probable that the one line on the donation of Rome by Constantine to Silvester, where the poet speaks 'puzza forte' would have sufficed to put the whole poem under an interdict."

"I believe," said I, "that the line which has excited the most talk is that in which Ariosto throws doubt on the general resurrection. Ariosto," I added, "in speaking of the hermit who would have hindered Rhodomonte from getting possession of Isabella, widow of Zerbin, paints the African, who wearied of the hermit's sermons, seizes him and throws him so far that he dashes him against a rock, against which he remains in a dead swoon, so that 'che al novissimo di forse fia desto'."

This 'forse' which may possibly have only been placed there as a flower of rhetoric or as a word to complete the verse, raised a great uproar, which would doubtless have greatly amused the poet if he had had time!

"It is a pity," said Madame Denis, "that Ariosto was not more careful in these hyperbolic expressions."

"Be quiet, niece, they are full of wit. They are all golden grains, which are dispersed throughout the work in the best taste."

The conversation was then directed towards various topics, and at last we got to the 'Ecoissaise' we had played at Soleure.

They knew all about it.

M. de Voltaire said that if I liked to play it at his house he would write to M. de Chavigni to send the Lindane, and that he himself would play Montrose. I excused myself by saying that Madame was at Bale and that I should be obliged to go on my journey the next day. At this he exclaimed loudly, aroused the whole company against me, and said at last that he should consider my visit as an insult unless I spared him a week at least of my society.

"Sir," said I, "I have only come to Geneva to have the honour of seeing you, and now that I have obtained that favour I have nothing more to do."

"Have you come to speak to me, or for me to speak to you?"

"In a measure, of course, to speak to you, but much more for you to speak to me."

"Then stay here three days at least; come to dinner every day, and we will have some conversation."

The invitation was so flattering and pressing that I could not refuse it with a good grace. I therefore accepted, and I then left to go and write.

I had not been back for a quarter of an hour when a syndic of the town, an amiable man, whom I had seen at M. de Voltaire's, and whose name I shall not mention, came and asked me to give him supper. "I was present," said he, "at your argument with the great man, and though I did not open my mouth I should much like to have an hour's talk with you." By way of reply, I embraced him, begging him to excuse my dressing-gown, and telling him that I should be glad if he would spend the whole night with me.

The worthy man spent two hours with me, without saying a word on the subject of literature, but to please me he had no need to talk of books, for he was a disciple of Epicurus and Socrates, and the evening was spent in telling little stories, in bursts of laughter, and in accounts of the various kinds of pleasure obtainable at Geneva. Before leaving me he asked me to come and sup with him on the following evening, promising that boredom should not be of the party.

"I shall wait for you," said I.

"Very good, but don't tell anyone of the party."

I promised to follow his instructions.

Next morning, young Fox came to see me with the two Englishmen I had seen at M. de Voltaire's. They proposed a game of quinze, which I accepted, and after losing fifty louis I left off, and we walked about the town till dinner-time.

We found the Duc de Villars at Delices; he had come there to consult Dr. Tronchin, who had kept him alive for the last ten years.

I was silent during the repast, but at dessert, M. de Voltaire, knowing that I had reasons for not liking the Venetian Government, introduced the subject; but I disappointed him, as I maintained that in no country could a man enjoy more perfect liberty than in Venice.

"Yes," said he, "provided he resigns himself to play the part of a dumb man."

And seeing that I did not care for the subject, he took me by the arm to his garden, of which, he said, he was the creator. The principal walk led to a pretty running stream.

"'Tis the Rhone," said he, "which I send into France."

"It does not cost you much in carriage, at all events," said I.

He smiled pleasantly and shewed me the principal street of Geneva, and Mont Blanc which is the highest point of the Alps.

Bringing back the conversation to Italian literature, he began to talk nonsense with much wit and learning, but always concluding with a false judgment. I let him talk on. He spoke of Homer, Dante, and Petrarch, and everybody knows what he thought of these great geniuses, but he did himself wrong in writing what he thought. I contented myself with saying that if these great men did not merit the esteem of those who studied them; it would at all events be a long time before they had to come down from the high place in which the praise of centuries, had placed them.

The Duc de Villars and the famous Tronchin came and joined us. The doctor, a tall fine man, polite, eloquent without being a conversationalist, a learned physician, a man of wit, a favourite pupil of Boerhaave, without scientific jargon, or charlatanism, or self-sufficiency, enchanted me. His system of medicine was based on regimen, and to make rules he had to be a man of profound science. I have been assured, but can scarcely believe it, that he cured a consumptive patient of a secret disease by means of the milk of an ass, which he had submitted to thirty strong frictions of mercury by four sturdy porters.

As to Villars he also attracted my attention, but in quite a different way to Tronchin. On examining his face and manner I thought I saw before me a woman of seventy dressed as a man, thin and emaciated, but still proud of her looks, and with claims to past beauty. His cheeks and lips were painted, his eyebrows blackened, and his teeth were false; he wore a huge wig, which, exhaled amber, and at his buttonhole was an enormous bunch of flowers, which touched his chin. He affected

a gracious manner, and he spoke so softly that it was often impossible to hear what he said. He was excessively polite and affable, and his manners were those of the Regency. His whole appearance was supremely ridiculous. I was told that in his youth he was a lover of the fair sex, but now that he was no longer good for anything he had modestly made himself into a woman, and had four pretty pets in his employ, who took turns in the disgusting duty of warming his old carcass at night.

Villars was governor of Provence, and had his back eaten up with cancer. In the course of nature he should have been buried ten years ago, but Tronchin kept him alive with his regimen and by feeding the wounds on slices of veal. Without this the cancer would have killed him. His life might well be called an artificial one.

I accompanied M. de Voltaire to his bedroom, where he changed his wig and put on another cap, for he always wore one on account of the rheumatism to which he was subject. I saw on the table the *Summa* of St. Thomas, and among other Italian poets the 'Secchia Rapita' of Tassoni.

"This," said Voltaire, "is the only tragicomic poem which Italy has. Tassoni was a monk, a wit and a genius as well as a poet."

"I will grant his poetical ability but not his learning, for he ridiculed the system of Copernicus, and said that if his theories were followed astronomers would not be able to calculate lunations or eclipses."

"Where does he make that ridiculous remark?"

"In his academical discourses."

"I have not read them, but I will get them."

He took a pen and noted the name down, and said,—

"But Tassoni has criticised Petrarch very ingeniously."

"Yes, but he has dishonoured taste and literature, like Muratori."

"Here he is. You must allow that his learning is immense."

"Est ubi peccat."

Voltaire opened a door, and I saw a hundred great files full of papers.

"That's my correspondence," said he. "You see before you nearly fifty thousand letters, to which I have replied."

"Have you a copy of your answers?"

"Of a good many of them. That's the business of a servant of mine, who has nothing else to do."

"I know plenty of booksellers who would give a good deal to get hold of your answers."

"Yes; but look out for the booksellers when you publish anything, if you have not yet begun; they are greater robbers than Barabbas."

"I shall not have anything to do with these gentlemen till I am an old man."

"Then they will be the scourge of your old age."

Thereupon I quoted a Macaronic verse by Merlin Coccaeus.

"Where's that from?"

"It's a line from a celebrated poem in twenty-four cantos."

"Celebrated?"

"Yes; and, what is more, worthy of being celebrated; but to appreciate it one must understand the Mantuan dialect."

"I could make it out, if you could get me a copy."

"I shall have the honour of presenting you with one to-morrow."

"You will oblige me extremely."

We had to leave his room and spend two hours in the company, talking over all sorts of things. Voltaire displayed all the resources of his brilliant and fertile wit, and charmed everyone in spite of his sarcastic observations which did not even spare those present, but he had an inimitable manner of lancing a sarcasm without wounding a person's feelings. When the great man accompanied his witticisms with a graceful smile he could always get a laugh.

He kept up a notable establishment and an excellent table, a rare circumstance with his poetic brothers, who are rarely favourites of Plutus as he was. He was then sixty years old, and had a hundred and twenty thousand francs a year. It has been said maliciously that this great man enriched himself by cheating his publishers; whereas the fact was that he fared no better than any other author, and instead of duping them was often their dupe. The Cramers must be excepted, whose fortune he made. Voltaire had other ways of making money than by his pen; and as he was greedy of fame, he often gave his works away on the sole condition that they were to be printed and published. During the short time I was with him, I was a witness of such a generous action; he made a present to his bookseller of the "Princess of Babylon," a charming story which he had written in three days.

My epicurean syndic was exact to his appointment, and took me to a house at a little distance where he introduced me to three young ladies, who, without being precisely beautiful, were certainly ravishing. Two of them were sisters. I had an easy and pleasant welcome, and from their intellectual appearance and gay manners I anticipated a delightful evening, and I was not disappointed. The half hour before supper was passed in conversation, decent but without restraint, and during supper, from the hints the syndic gave me, I guessed what would happen after dessert.

It was a hot evening, and on the pretext of cooling ourselves, we undressed so as to be almost in a state of nature. What an orgy we had! I am sorry I am obliged to draw a veil over the most exciting details. In the midst of our licentious gaiety, whilst we were heated by love, champagne, and a discourse of an exciting nature, I proposed to recite Grecourt's 'Y Gyec'. When I had finished the voluptuous poem, worthy of an abbe's pen, I saw that the eyes of the three beauties were all aflame, and said,—

"Ladies, if you like, I will shew you all three, one after the other, why the sentence, 'Gaudeant bene nati', was uttered"; and without waiting for their reply, I succeeded in making them happy. The syndic was radiant, he was pleased at having given me a present entirely to my taste; and I fancied that the entertainment was not displeasing to the three Graces, who were kept low by the Sybarite, as his powers were almost limited to desires. The girls lavished their thanks on me, while I endeavoured to assure them of my gratitude; but they leapt for joy when they heard the syndic asking me to come next day.

As he was taking me back to my inn I told him how great a pleasure he had given me, and he said he had brought up the three jewels himself.

"You," he added, "are the only man besides myself they know. You shall see them again, but I beg you will take care not to leave anything behind you, for in this town of prejudices that would be a great misfortune for them and for me."

"You are always moderate in your enjoyment, then?" I said to him.

"Unfortunately, that is no merit as far as I am concerned. I was born for the service of love, and Venus has punished me for worshipping her when I was too young."

After a good night's sleep I awoke in an active mood, and began to write a letter to Voltaire in blank verse, which cost me four times the pains that rhymed verses would have done. I sent it to him with the poem of Theophile Falengue, but I made a mistake in doing so, as I might have known he would not care for it; one cannot appreciate what one does not understand. I then went to Mr. Fox, where I found the two Englishmen who offered me my revenge. I lost a hundred Louis, and was glad to see them set out for Lausanne.

The syndic had told me that the three young ladies belonged to respectable families, but were not rich. I puzzled my head to think of some useful present I might make them without offending them, and at last I hit on a plan of the most ridiculous nature, as the reader will see. I went to a jeweller and told him to make me three golden balls, each of two ounces in weight.

At noon I went to M. de Voltaire's. He was not to be seen, but Madame Denis consoled me for his absence. She had wit, learning without pretension, taste, and a great hatred for the King of Prussia, whom she called a villain. She asked about my beautiful housekeeper, and congratulated me

on having married her to a respectable man. Although I feel now that she was quite right, I was far from thinking so then; the impression was too fresh on my mind. Madame Denis begged me to tell her how I had escaped from The Leads, but as the story was rather a long one I promised to satisfy her another time.

M. de Voltaire did not dine with us; he appeared, however, at five o'clock, holding a letter in his hand.

"Do you know," said he, "the Marquis Albergati Capacelli, senator of Bologna, and Count Paradisi?"

"I do not know Paradisi, but I know Albergati by sight and by reputation; he is not a senator, but one of the Forty, who at Bologna are Fifty."

"Dear me! That seems rather a riddle!"

"Do you know him?"

"No, but he has sent me Goldoni's 'Theatre,' the translation of my Tancred, and some Bologna sausages, and he says he will come and see me."

"He will not come; he is not such a fool."

"How a fool? Would there be anything foolish in coming to see me?"

"Certainly not, as far as you are concerned; but very much so far his own sake."

"Would you mind telling me why?"

"He knows what he would lose; for he enjoys the idea you seem to have of him, and if he came you would see his nothingness, and good-bye to the illusion. He is a worthy man with six thousand sequins a year, and a craze for the theatre. He is a good actor enough, and has written several comedies in prose, but they are fit neither for the study nor the stage."

"You certainly give him a coat which does not make him look any bigger."

"I assure you it is not quite small enough."

"But tell me how he can belong to the Forty and the Fifty?"

"Just as at Bale noon is at eleven."

"I understand; just as your Council of Ten is composed of seventeen members."

"Exactly; but the cursed Forty of Bologna are men of another kind."

"Why cursed?"

"Because they are not subject to the fisc, and are thus enabled to commit whatever crimes they like with perfect impunity; all they have got to do is to live outside the state borders on their revenues."

"That is a blessing, and not a curse; but let me return to our subject. I suppose the Marquis Albergati is a man of letters?"

"He writes well enough, but he is fond of the sound of his own voice, his style is prolix, and I don't think he has much brains."

"He is an actor, I think you said?"

"Yes, and a very good one, above all, when he plays the lover's part in one of his own plays."

"Is he a handsome man?"

"Yes, on the stage, but not elsewhere; his face lacks expression."

"But his plays give satisfaction?"

"Not to persons who understand play writing; they would be hissed if they were intelligible."

"And what do you think of Goldoni?"

"I have the highest opinion of him. Goldoni is the Italian Moliere."

"Why does he call himself poet to the Duke of Parma?"

"No doubt to prove that a wit as well as a fool has his weak points; in all probability the duke knows nothing about it. He also calls himself a barrister, though he is such only in his own imagination. Goldoni is a good play writer, and nothing more. Everybody in Venice knows me for his friend, and I can therefore speak of him with authority. He does not shine in society, and in spite of the fine satire of his works he is a man of an extremely gentle disposition."

"So I have been told. He is poor, and wants to leave Venice. The managers of the theatres where they play his pieces will not like that."

"People talked about getting him a pension, but the project has been relegated to the Greek Kalends, as they said that if he had a pension he would write no more."

"Cumae refused to give a pension to Homer, for fear that all the blind men would ask for a pension."

We spent a pleasant day, and he thanked me heartily for the copy of the Macaronicon, which he promised to read. He introduced me to a Jesuit he had in his household, who was called Adam, and he added, after telling me his name, "not the first Adam." I was told afterwards that Voltaire used to play backgammon with him, and when he lost he would throw the dice and the box at his head. If Jesuits were treated like that all the world over, perhaps we should have none but inoffensive Jesuits at last, but that happy time is still far off.

I had scarcely got to my inn in the evening when I received my three golden balls, and as soon as the syndic came we set off to renew our voluptuous orgy. On the way he talked about modesty, and said,—

"That feeling which prevents our shewing those parts which we have been taught to cover from our childhood, may often proceed from virtue, but is weaker than the force of education, as it cannot resist an attack when the attacking party knows what he is about. I think the easiest way to vanquish modesty is to ignore its presence, to turn it into ridicule, to carry it by storm. Victory is certain. The hardihood of the assailer subdues the assailed, who usually only wishes to be conquered, and nearly always thanks you for your victory.

"Clement of Alexandria, a learned man and a philosopher, has remarked that the modesty which appears so deeply rooted in women's hearts really goes no farther than the clothes they wear, and that when these are plucked off no trace of it remains."

We found the three girls lightly clad and sitting on a large sofa, and we sat down opposite to them. Pleasant talk and a thousand amorous kisses occupied the half hour just before supper, and our combat did not begin till we had eaten a delicious repast, washed down with plenty of champagne.

We were sure of not being interrupted by the maid and we put ourselves at our ease, whilst our caresses became more lively and ardent. The syndic, like a careful man, drew a packet of fine French letters from his pocket, and delivered a long eulogium on this admirable preservative from an accident which might give rise to a terrible and fruitless repentance. The ladies knew them, and seemed to have no objection to the precaution; they laughed heartily to see the shape these articles took when they were blown out. But after they had amused themselves thus for some time, I said,

"My dear girls, I care more for your honour than your beauty; but do not think I am going to shut myself in a piece of dead skin to prove that I am alive. Here," I added, drawing out the three golden balls, "is a surer and less disagreeable way of securing you from any unpleasant consequences. After fifteen years' experience I can assure you that with these golden balls you can give and take without running the least risk. For the future you will have no need of those humiliating sheaths. Trust in me and accept this little present from a Venetian who adores you."

"We are very grateful," said the elder of the two sisters, "but how are these pretty balls used?"

"The ball has to be at the rear of the temple of love, whilst the amorous couple are performing the sacrifice. The antipathy communicated to the metal by its being soaked for a certain time in an alkaline solution prevents impregnation."

"But," said the cousin, "one must take great care that the ball is not shaken out by the motion before the end of the sacrifice."

"You needn't be afraid of that if you place yourself in a proper position."

"Let us see how it's done," said the syndic, holding a candle for me to put the ball in place.

The charming cousin had gone too far to turn back; she had to submit to the operation. I placed the ball in such a position that it could not fall out before I was in; however, it fell out towards the end,

just as we were separating. The victim perceived that I had taken her in. However, she said nothing, picked up the ball, and challenged the two sisters to submit to the pleasant experiment, to which they lent themselves with the greatest interest; while the syndic, who had no faith in the virtues of the metal, contented himself with looking on. After half an hour's rest I began again, without balls, assuring them that I would be careful, and I kept my word, without depriving them of the pleasure in the slightest degree.

When it was time to part, these girls, who had formerly been scantily provided for, threw their arms round my neck, overwhelmed me with caresses, and declared how much they owed me. The syndic told them that I was going in two days, and suggested that they should make me stay a day longer in Geneva, and I made this sacrifice joyfully. The worthy syndic had an engagement on the following day, and I sorely needed a holiday myself. He took me back to my inn, thanking me almost as heartily as his charming nymphs.

After having enjoyed a calm and refreshing sleep ten hours, I felt myself able to enjoy the delightful society of M. de Voltaire. I went to his house, but I was disappointed in my hopes, as it pleased the great man to be in a fault-finding and sarcastic mood the whole day. He knew I had to leave on the morrow.

He began by thanking me at table for my present of Merlin Coccaeus.

"You certainly gave it me with good intentions," said he, "but I owe you no thanks for praising it so highly, as you made me lose four hours in reading nonsense."

I felt my hair stand on end, but I mastered my emotions, and told him quietly enough that one day, perhaps, he would find himself obliged to praise the poem more highly than I had done. I quoted several instances of the insufficiency of a first perusal.

"That's true," said he; "but as for your Merlin, I will read him no more. I have put him beside Chapelain's 'Pucelle'."

"Which pleases all the critics, in spite of its bad versification, for it is a good poem, and Chapelain was a real poet though he wrote bad verses. I cannot overlook his genius."

My freedom must have shocked him, and I might have guessed it when he told me he had put the 'Macaronicon' beside the 'Pucelle'. I knew that there was a poem of the same title in circulation, which passed for Voltaire's; but I also knew that he disavowed it, and I thought that would make him conceal the vexation my explanation must have caused him. It was not so, however; he contradicted me sharply, and I closed with him.

"Chapelain," said I, "has the merit of having rendered his subject-matter pleasant, without pandering to the tastes of his readers by saying things shocking to modesty and piety. So thinks my master Crebillon:"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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