

No, I can't tell you now. We should go through to the drawing room. They're expecting me to play.

I've told you all, I'll tell you. He met me at an inn in Cesena. I'd cut my hair. Don't ask. Unless you want a haircut ...

Ah look, I *will* tell you, quickly. (Maybe my story will help.)

You know my privileges, you share them: aristocrat, educated, French. Yet even I struggled, under the weight of an abusive marriage.

Picture my titled husband, thumping me repeatedly. My equally titled father-in-law, cheering him on. My advice: never marry an aristocrat.

But how to escape?

- * murder? Not good with blood
- * suicide? A little final
- * disguise? Now that's more like it!

The abbess at my school was appalled at my mother: she played the cello. Between her legs. She was more appalled at my father's insistence that I learn cello too. I took it upon myself to play *par excellence*, if only to bless the abbess ...

And so, began my emancipation: unhindered music, which left me imagining breeches and shirt, astride, not just a cello, but life itself! I yearned to – breach - convention.

And my children couldn't protect me from the titled husband. Don't judge me. Have you any idea how hard it is to leave your children?

The disguise took some planning too:

* a cloak

* servant's breeches. Clean. I checked.

* the crucial scissors.

La Pelud, the husband's home town, was crowded that evening. I excused myself to the lavatory. Hair snipped and dress abandoned, I hopped on a carriage flying out of town.

I soon saw my disguise as a man would be hard to keep in daylight. I needed a partner in crime. There was a man, travelling to Italy. I wanted to go to Italy. Churlish to refuse. Then, in Rome, I met another ancient – a Hungarian this time. I abandoned the first old man in favour of the Hungarian variety. We understood each other. Enough. I could pass as a man. Extraordinary how inns don't look too closely at their guests. Or so I thought ...

Which is how I found myself hiding under bedclothes, in a man's nightgown, whilst an almighty rumpus broke out in our doorway.

'Who is under your sheets, sirrah? You were seen entering the room with another man! Or was it a woman?' shouted the *Sbirri* in Italian (they were moral police of the Papal states).

But my Hungarian spoke only Latin. Obviously. Very well educated. The police spoke only Italian.

So, on they argued – Latin - Italian – Latin – Italian - no-one understood my Hungarian's ancient tongue. Including me. Well, *that* ancient tongue anyway ... I digress. The shouting continued.

Then out of nowhere, Monsieur's voice, translating. Deep. Calm. Curious.

He alone charmed away the inquisitors. I emerged from bedsheets, to see him eyeing me like an amused wolf.

I recognised instantly a kindred sprite. There was no debate. The Hungarian conceded and I changed travelling companions. Monsieur and I set off for Parma. And so, began 'four months of perfect and continuous joy', as he put it.

I was the love of his life, his diaries say. To me, he was an absolute gentleman. I asked only for no commitment; and for his help in reconciling me to my parents. He obliged me with the most expensive inn in Parma, beautiful clothes (back into corsets, out of my breeches) and – quite unexpectedly – he bought me a cello.

Things changed when I was noticed by a French contact of my family's, after I spontaneously borrowed a cello to sight-read a concerto at a party. Monsieur didn't know I played at all; he wept at his secretive, musical lady. I cried too, later: for all that I missed of home and would miss of him. 'It was the beginning of the end,' he wrote.

I said to him, 'You will also forget Henriette.' But he never did forget me, despite his other - ... adventures. We still correspond. And I won't tell you his name; just as he was discreet enough not to acknowledge me (at my request) when we last met.

So, for all who have no privilege of escape, I wish them partners in crime, strong breeches and a good pair of scissors. Now, to the drawing room!

Henriette – lover of Casanova

Cathy Walker

Henriette came from Aix-en-Provence, where she or family had a house in city and a country house at end of an alley of trees, either 1 or 1.5 leagues north of Croix d'Or crossroads on the Aix–Marseille road.

She was of noble birth. Her family was wealthy and well connected. She had been educated to a very high standard in a French convent.

Like her mother before her, Henriette played the cello, an unusual instrument for women to take up at the time (because of the posture).

In autumn 1749 she left her husband under threatening circumstances and travelled by boat to Italy, where, on one occasion, she signed herself into an inn as 'Anne d'Arci'.

In February 1750, Henriette returned to Provence via Geneva, where she stopped to collect a substantial amount of money from the Tronchin bankers.

Once she was back home, Henriette either lived alone or under the protection of her family – probably her father, or brothers – one of whom Casanova refers to in his memoirs as a 'chevalier' or knight.

By her own admission, Henriette made three follies in her life:

- 1. presumably her marriage to a man who treated her badly;*
- 2. may have been an extra-marital affair;*
- 3. running away with the Hungarian officer.*

Judith Summers [author] suggests that a possible scenario is that Henriette was mistreated by her husband, was unfaithful to him and ran away to Italy, probably with her lover and wearing his clothes. When their relationship turned sour, she realised the impossibility of surviving indefinitely on her wits and sought reconciliation with her family. Thereafter Henriette lived separately from her husband, wintering in Aix and spending the summers at the family château near the Croix d'Or with her parents and/or siblings.