

Ladies and Gentlemen, *benvenuti*, to Carlisle House, the first and finest of London's clubs, on the east side of Soho Square, in this year of 1761. You are fortunate, for by your illustrious connections or by hook or by crook (tut-tut), you have a ticket to tonight's event. Now, instruct your coachmen to turn your horses' heads towards Frith Street (I run a one-way system; didn't know it would take off), and ... enter!

Take some champagne (pace yourself, Lord Palmerston) - and glide with me through my candle-lit apartments like Chinese boxes, festooned with mirrors and Mr Chippendale's furniture *à la mode* (as those silly Parisians like to say). On your left a casino or two, should any - assignments prove - ... favourable. Through the glorious octagonal glass doors (I actually can't tell you their price) to my new ballroom - young Bach plays for our Arcadian evening tonight - and down below, a banqueting table for 400. It's all cost me £24,000, they tell me. I have no head for money.

I trust you are suitably attired. 'Sir Walpole' thinks I don't recognise him in his shepherd's smock, and I do believe that's you, Miss Burney, behind Pulcinella's mask. (Lady Harringtons's diamond gown is hardly rustic.) ... Do be careful of the servants, my dear. They say shiny things go missing round here. I don't believe such things. I am born and bred of the theatre.

... Ah Giuseppe - my son by my husband - for god's sake, boy, talk to the guests. Don't just stand in the corner. ... He's been in Paris too long. Giacomo Casanova, my childhood friend, gave me 1,000 ducats and I gave him Giuseppe to play a role in one of his ruses. Seemed a fair deal. I don't know. I have no head for money.

And there is Mr Casanova, my son's tutor. He wants me to provide his entrée into London society. I kept him waiting a day before receiving him, then at dinner I instructed my daughter Sophia to be most unwelcoming. He thought she'd be a courtesan by now - as I was - or an opera singer - as I was; seduce an elderly senator from her bedroom window - as I did; rely on a clergyman or two [wave] for this 'fairy palace' - as I do. Without status or rights or money of one's own - what is one to do?

But I bought Sophia the best education: three languages, history, geography, and the harp.

Oh *che stupido*, I have not introduced myself to our new members of The Society. I am Teresa Cornelys, daughter of theatre impresario Giuseppe Imer, who was besotted with Giacomo Casanova's mother. Maybe those were the ties that bind ... for when the bailiffs came knocking, and my fairy palace turned to a house of cards, and the furniture was sold in a grubby little auction (bought by one Mr Chippendale) and I was afraid to go out except on Sundays when my creditors weren't allowed to approach me and when they eventually came through the octagonal doors, it was Giacomo Casanova who provided bail - in exchange for a more - parental - role with Sophia ... who stopped eating. A fair deal, I think.

Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you this 19th day of August 1797. I've escaped from the King's Bench Prison, sojourned at the notorious Newgate, and now in Fleet Debtors' Prison I lie in abject poverty and want. ... Sophia has an orphanage where her charges are educated. It is her endeavour, as long as her life is spared, 'not to owe anything'. My breasts bleed. The devil is dragging me down.

My daughter didn't pay for my burial; 'a pauper's grave is good enough for a woman who led an improper life,' she said.

I bequeathed to my children - ... nothing, in the end. I refused to bow to the limitations of my life. I brought the spirit of Masquerade from Venezia to London town. Ladies and gentlemen, I was Teresa Cornelys, who bequeathed to you - Soho.

Teresa Cornelys, 18th-century Empress of Taste and Pleasure

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