

When that was done, they told personal stories of their lives. Each admitted to a loneliness and wished for spiritual communion.

Every sin was confessed, every desire expressed and the sinner absolved. It was the marriage of a group.

"But we'll pay," Hugo the moralizer remonstrated.

Riva Rich kissed him on the cheek. "You idiot."

Della kissed him. "Of course not."

Dallas kissed him. "It's your guilt."

"You ass," Greta said.

"When you're with us you don't need to feel guilty obeying our rules," Galanna said.

"We could be arrested," he said.

"Nudism isn't against the law," Riva said.

"Just leave him alone," Robbie said.

"It seems so unreal," Hugo the remonstrator said.

Foolish people, all of you! In your real, real world. In case you came in late, I'm writing for people who can't sleep. That is, in case you're thumbing through. I'm writing for a special market. I'm thinking I can establish a following in this market for boring books.

Meanwhile, back at the party, Riva has just asked if they will ever get together again and Della has made the statement:

"Sex isn't so important as communion of spirit."

Their adorable Della!

They talked through most of the second night, of everything under the sun, sharing experiences. It was all unreal. All of it like a dream. They had supper at midnight.

"Put on your clothes, Galanna. And do a strip for us!" Greta pleaded.

Galanna dressed and stripped. It was the end of the entertainment. Fanchon went through the house and gathered up every blanket she could find and padded the floor with them. The company bedded down. Each in his little cocoon of self. Dreaming their little dreams of the real world outside, doubtless.

Fanchon / James Mechem

Fanchon was lying in the road.

I bent down. "Dimensions, please."

She breathed in my ear for answer.

"Can't hear you, young lady."

"What can my dimensions matter to you?"

It was some thousands of miles away when I appeared before Fanchon.

"Oh yes—" she was saying.

"You see what I came for—"

Fanchon was dressed. You should have seen. I about breathed my last looking, getting my eyes full of her. I think she had added an inch or two to her bust in the interim. I was sorry to hear about it. In a way. What happened to my Fanchon? I cried on Anita Ekberg's shoulder. It was a big shoulder but it was not Fanchon's and who cares about a movie star when he does not have his Fanchon? I wouldn't trade all the movie stars in the world for my one and only sweet Fanchon.

"I've waited four hundred years for this," I said, taking Fanchon's nipple between my teeth.

Then the jungle appeared and it was some time else. "Fanchon," I said. "Who has tied you in this python's path?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Fanchon," I said. "You are at my mercy." And while you were tied hand and foot I pulled down your pants and left you that way. I smeared honey in your vagina and I thought that would attract something.

"Fanchon," I cried then, overcome with remorse for what I had done, the brutal way I had treated you. A tear was forming in the corner of my eye. I brushed it away without even noticing I was crying I was so upset. I smelled almonds in the air. Music was playing in the next yard, just over the hedge, and I heard the hubbub of a party and the clink of glasses, barbecued woodsmoke and veldt, things like that, the strains of old familiar vocalists . . .

"How may the tiger touch me!" It was some society dame. "I'd like to touch her," I said to my companion of the evening.

"How crass!" she observed.

I returned to the path where you were lying helpless, gagged and hog-tied, with a little stream of ants making you squirm. I sat down and listened to your muffled pleas for mercy.

I wasn't sure exactly what you were saying. It was something like, "Have mercy on me," but I don't know. Words to that effect. You wanted me to release you, at any rate. I undid your bonds. First thing you did was to rub your wrists where they had chafed. You brushed the ants out of your snatch of course. It didn't take you long to do that.

"Honey," I said, tasting you.

"Darling," you said. "I owe you my life."

"Starting now you follow me everywhere then," I said.

When I went to a movie you went with me. When I played cards, you

played cards, when I fixed sandwiches you fixed sandwiches, when I rolled over in my sleep you rolled over in your sleep. You followed me to the ends of the earth. When I turned there you were. I didn't have to shout. "Fanchon," I said in a normal tone of voice and you appeared before me. "I love you, darling," I said.

You were always there when I needed you, quietly eating popcorn beside me and listening to the talk of my friends. They learned to accept you. They never got a chance to ask me that but you never gave them the chance, did you, darling? I could kiss you.

Have I been cruel to her? Yes. There's no getting around that. I've been cruel. I say I want to be kind and gentle.

Of course

I'm gentle. I show my gentleness. I show tenderness. Underneath I'm both of these. You have to see underneath—but don't call me cruel. I'm not. I'm gentle but I'm not always so overt and obvious about it. Sometimes I almost feel compassion. I respond with whatever I respond with, but underneath there is a gentleness. I think. Underneath the suspicion, the lust, the anger, the unresponsiveness, there is a potential gentleness, if nothing else, and an attempt at warmth. So my gaze is analytical, peering, disapproving, rebellious, complacent. But I believe in gentleness and kindness and I don't like to be cruel.

Yet

*I've been cruel. I'm cruel to my children when I lose my temper. When I feel she has hurt me I'm cruel right back. It doesn't matter the rationalization . . . I was cruel. You always hurt the one you love. The one you shouldn't hurt at all . . . Why am I laughing? It's not funny. (from "Mona" in *A Diary of Women* and from *Della*)*

Smooth as Silk / James Mechem

What was I doing when you approached me? I was playing checkers with an old man, my father, in Acacia Park. I kissed your hand and introduced you as my betrothed. Your smile won him over immediately. Then you and I went up into the mountains to our cabin and you took off every piece you were wearing. After supper we had wine and lay on the day bed under the bare light bulb. Your solitaire game was spread on the counter-