

CHAPTER 1



My first distinct memory of childhood was the great watchword of Apollo, fearfully emblazoned in black letters of wrought iron above the gate of the Creole cemetery where, one by one, my family was laid to rest. “He who enters here, know thyself.” Admitting, even embracing the truth of my own nature became the trial of my existence, a trial over which I have prevailed, finding acceptance.

It is, perhaps, a revelation I should have taken with me, past that gateway and into my own grave. Yet I have determined to chronicle the remarkable events of my life, for it was a wide and turbulent sea that carried me to this safe harbor. I want, not merely to indulge my own pleasure in reliving them, but to record them, without shame or pretense, and with no recourse to the rank absurdity of euphemism. Within these pages a cock is a cock, not a “machine,” and a fuck is a fuck, not a “transaction,” as in such outdated but still “scandalous” works as Mr. Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*, wherein, on occasion, it’s uncertain precisely what is happening, garden party or outright rape.

Such candor requires courage, for I know my own. The Age of Enlightenment is past, “enlightenment” being so often a code word

for the libertine, a call to free Mankind from the shackles of prudery and orthodoxy. The pendulum is swinging, backwards, away from the sheer and clinging Grecian gowns of my youth, and the beauties of the Court with their rouged nipples clearly visible beneath. A New Age has dawned, or so we're told, an age of Romance, "romance" being a code for courtly love from afar, love without juice, without sweat, without passion or pain. Every season of fashion brings another layer of petticoat. Propriety is god, Hypocrisy his willing handmaiden, which is the reason I've taken care none should know the true identity of the woman who writes these words, if only to protect the one whose life and happiness is dearer to me than my own.

As I sit in my elegant drawing room far above Fifth Avenue, pouring from a polished silver pot, it occurs to me how enviously safe is now my position, as the wife of one of the most powerful men of this city, and indeed of this clamorous and prosperous new nation. Though none should suppose I have subdued my true nature in exchange for the bloodless gratification of money or place.

For from that feverish night I met my husband, *la nuit d'amour fou*, a night of madness, I felt that incredible pull, like a lodestone, the magnetism of like unto like. At first sight, despite the daunting breadth and height of the man, he seemed somehow an innocent, younger even than his years. But then he turned from his pose of virtuous decorum, tilting his head with its strong, square lines, fixing on me the sapphire eyes, darkened by thick lashes any woman would covet, and I felt it, with no word spoken. I was born in the Indies, and I knew what was hidden in the tall cane before me; a viper, eyes hooded, body coiled, poised to strike.

An apt metaphor, considering what was not very well hidden by his cutaway coat and tight breeches. Long before the dawn, I was in the arms of a gamesman of wild imagination and inexhaustible variety. I was, in fact, tied down under him before the clock chimed midnight. As the days unfolded, I began to wonder if I would ever

see that massive serpent in a fallen state, nesting in exhaustion within the lush, dark hair. After so long a search, I'd found my Master, and he had found a more than willing Acolyte.

So, I will not endanger that propriety he wears in daylight, in order to safeguard the pleasures of the night, the reason for the satiated, contemplative smile I can feel on my face as I sip at the rich chocolate from Brazil, pen in hand.

I lay no claim to altruism, and certainly not to nobility of character. Yet I cannot deny the other reason I confess my life, apart from self-indulgence. It is for the daughters of this Age, the ones beginning their own journey. Kept unsullied like porcelain in a glass cabinet, shamed by their own desires, concealing a headstrong nature behind a carefully crafted façade of wide-eyed stupidity drilled into them like a catechism. Young women who have no awareness of the power they hold within the hands they've been told are weak. The power to rise, and the courage to fall. And the strength to rise again.

I suppose I was something of a Romantic as a child, though in truth I've always possessed a ruthlessly pragmatic nature that early reared its head. For this was the self that I would discover on my journey, the blinding pleasure I so often found when I yielded my own headstrong will to an even more powerful one. Of course, a prisoner is a prisoner, and must endure whatever comes at the behest of her turnkey, no less than some poor beast in a bridle, and I cannot say it always resulted in bliss. But the need was there, from the start, waiting for the man who could strike the flint to the fire.

Yet, how could my soul not be infused with the leaven of romance when I am a child of the Indies? The pearl of the Indies, Martinique, to the windward, a place of lush greenery and vibrant blooms, waterfalls over rocky gorges, azure seas and beauty beyond the description of a mortal tongue. A place of heat. One of our favorite foods on the island was called a plantain, and like so much that was good, was brought to us out of the slave quarters, the fruit beneath the tough, greenish-brown skin steamed or fried. It was

popularly believed that only on Martinique did the long plantains grow upward, stiff and erect, rather than hanging sadly down in their heavy bunches, and that this quirk of nature was a tribute from the gods of the trade winds paid to the lustful men of those shores.

Although I've discovered that all God's creatures have a talent of some sort, for music or business or science, it was difficult at first to face my own, since I have possessed a talent for lust from a young age, a proclivity that has only grown stronger with the passing years. I pleased myself for the first time at nine or ten, even before the onset of my first menses. Despite the many tales of amorous governesses and wicked schoolgirls leading a young maiden down the road of vice, I discovered the pleasure to be had from it in the same way one would scratch an itch, or stretch their muscles on awakening, without the necessity of any training at all.

Yet it's a mystery to me how, in my child's mind, I came to understand without being told that I must hide this natural act beneath my bedcovers at night. Long before I understood what it was to be aroused by the sight of a well-proportioned man in the glorious state in which he was made, I was plagued by vague imaginings, and always looked forward to my nightly ritual. Once darkness had fallen over my bedroom, my hand snaked beneath the bedclothes, beginning slowly, rubbing and massaging myself into a state of blind oblivion, until my whole body stiffened, and after a wave of blissful contortion, I was released to a most languid state before drifting into sleep.

But it was the contents of those vague thoughts, as I grew, that most troubled me, for in my youth I suffered a deep and shameful love for my father, the god of my idolatry. In truth I saw little of him, and I suppose this helped to form my image of him, not as father, but as Master, of the plantation, its inhabitants and his lone daughter. The feeling was biblical in its intensity, like the salacious daughters of Lot, in the way of scriptural tales dear to the medieval mind, now so often given the boot of a Sunday.

I was raised by my beloved nurse, whom I called Nana. My mother was a flighty and selfish creature who lived for the most part in Paris, spending the money my father sweated in the fields beside his slaves to earn. She claimed a weak constitution that made the climate of Martinique dangerous to her, though I knew it was mere boredom, love of luxury and excitement that caused her to desert us, leaving my father to a bleak existence, with no legitimate freedom to find comfort elsewhere.

He had many friends amongst the planters who'd also lost their wives, generally to childbirth or one of the fevers that swept the islands, and though he did not approve, I suppose it was difficult not to forgive them for finding solace in the quarters, taking mistresses from among the most exotic and lovely of the Africans, as well as the mulattos and quadroons, the bastard daughters and granddaughters of those who'd done the same a generation before. On many of the plantations, the gentleman's native lady sat at his table, and his bastard children played side by side with his white ones, while the most promising were occasionally sent to France to be educated. It was a thing to which I grew accustomed, despite my father's disapproval, and I came to believe it the better way, especially as the republican fervor to emancipate the slaves swept the island.

Martinique in those days was a place for intrepid adventurers, suitable to our pirate founders, though Man's mischievous desire to incessantly categorize his own was fully in evidence. The blacks lived in a rigid hierarchy, with the *gens de couleur*, the free people of color at the top, most of them of mixed blood, a population ever increasing in number, further divided into the many designations of *mestif* and *quarteron*, *câpre* and *griffe*, a hidebound caste system eccentric to outsiders. Even the slaves were divided, into house slaves and field slaves and the *patronés*, those who were freed in all but the law, by masters unwilling to pay the steep tax on manumissions. The whites, as well, were of many classes, but principally two; the lower, or *petits blancs*, including the *engagés*, bonded

servants or those sentenced to the island for petty crimes, and the upper, the *grands blancs*, the wealthiest of the plantation owners, especially those of noble families. Of course, not all grew wealthy, and many a failed planter still proudly produced his certificate of nobility on any pretext to anyone who would look at it, an affectation my father despised.

For he was truly of the peerage, his father having been a marquis in the north of Gascony, though not particularly well off. As his lands failed, my grandfather drifted north, drawn by the opportunities of the great seaport of La Rochelle. The French government, in an effort to settle the island, incessantly proclaimed Martinique a land of opportunity. As he watched the vast wealth flowing in and out of the port from the trade in sugar, he chose to risk all, to emigrate and start his own plantation.

The French Revolution came near the time of my grandfather's death, and it robbed my father legally of his title. Years later, when Napoleon restored the status of the *ancien regime*, it no longer mattered to him, and even less to me, for the nobility of his mien and appearance was not a thing that could be bestowed by a piece of parchment.

Yet, despite his nobility, my father had blinded himself to slavery, to its essential evil. He was far better to his people than most, which in some ways made it worse, for he seemed to believe he could infuse something evil with goodness and fair play. He encouraged them to the Church, to marry and start families, and though this was unarguably to his advantage, since every new life carried the odious appendage of a value in coin, he genuinely believed it brought happiness and stability. His physician cared for our slaves, and he gave his people both Saturday and Sunday free, unless there was a harvest. In this way, they could work their own small plots beside their shacks, to vary their diet, and still have a day of Sabbath rest. He decreed other improvements to their lives, and fostered their gatherings, the singing and dancing and storytelling that offered some relief from the labor. The unremitting,

ceaseless toil of the cane, sun-up to darkness, the sweat of the fields and the inferno of the mill.

However, he discouraged strong drink, particularly their favored brew. The natives called it *tafia*, the whites “black lightning,” pure alcohol, a cast-off of rum that hadn’t been aged. I’d never tasted it, but had smelled it, and that was enough. Trapped in its ruthless coils, death could come upon a man long before his time. Of course, my father was often defied in these edicts, and punishment was doled out for offenses; the cane, the shackles, even the whip, though he held a temperate hand, and the song of the lash was rarely heard at Presque Isle.

But Martinique was a place of violent contrasts, in the island and people. It was often said to be two islands unnaturally joined, the south with its white sand and bright blue water, and the mountainous jungle of the north, where the cane grew. Even the winds were contrary that blew over Presque Isle, our small manor house, winds that could bring a hurricane in their wake, when the two opposing forces slammed against one another, joining in a tumultuous embrace that uprooted trees and tore homes apart.

And so it shouldn’t have been surprising, I suppose, that despite his temperance, my father on occasion slipped from his pedestal, driven near to madness by his loneliness. It was a thing for which I did not despise him, especially considering the openly animalistic behavior of many of the young sons of the planters, who literally ran wild in the quarters, until the mulattos of the island began to outnumber the whites, a matter of grave concern to him. My father berated these jaded young libertines for their devotion to wine and native flesh. He walked alone.

And how I despised my mother for this! For her desertion, not of me, but of him. When she wrote on occasion suggesting I join her in Paris, my reaction was so distressing my father never put me from him, a thing I believe caused her little grief. And as I grew older, I began to feel that I was the rightful one to have her place, for I worshipped that which she had scorned. My father was still a

man in his prime, with broad shoulders and a masculine countenance graced with piercing hazel eyes, a face I never tired of contemplating. By the age of fourteen I sat as hostess, and took care to ensure what little comfort could be given him came from my hand, preparing his favorite foods, washing and pressing his clothes to perfection rather than allowing servants or slaves to do it, reading aloud to him in the evening. Though I sported with friends, ran free on the sand and rode bareback in the sun, these joys still paled in comparison to anything large or small I could do for him.

It was at the same age of fourteen that I came to my womanhood, a painful and distasteful monthly annoyance that Nana seemed to feel a deep mystery, and cause for ritual celebration. Though my father still saw me as a little girl, Nana began to treat me more as a woman, revealing more of the truths of life. And I think it was Nana who understood, for as time passed I believe this monthly ferment contributed to a growing willfulness on my part.

It was a willfulness that confounded my father. I had been a docile child, perhaps not so much from my nature as from a desperate desire to please him, and it was rare that any punishment was ever inflicted on me. But the most vivid awakening I experienced came at his hands, and without the slightest understanding on his part.

It was in the time after Epiphany, as the island prepared for its most joyous holiday, Carnivale, four days of wild celebration before the dreary self-denial of Lent. Many of the great families gave elaborate masqued balls, while the slaves had their own celebration, called Canboulay. I'd always wanted to see it, though Papa had forbidden this. Urged on by my friends, especially the chief provocateurs, the three sons of Marcel Ducasse, I played the truant, going with them to swim, then slipping into the hills by the river to join the festival.

It was as nothing I'd ever seen, the lively cariso music, the *chouval bwa* of drums and bamboo flutes. The dancers spilled out

from beneath the traditional *kaiso* bunting, many in costumes that were caricatures of the *grands blanc* masquerade. As night descended, the torches of cane were lit, the *cannes brulées* of its name, and the stick dancers, wearing tiny bells, engaged in sham combat as they leapt and caroused.

It was primal and free, the rhythm intoxicating. We danced, hidden in the shadows, while the singers called out improvised lyrics, the crowd replying, like responses in the Mass. My patois was fluent, and I knew they were mocking the planters, which made it all the more daring. I stayed until the Vaval was lit and set adrift, a huge figure of twigs and papier-mâché that burned across the water, closing the gay evening.

My father was under great pressure at that time, for the British had taken our island, and would hold it for several years, part of their ongoing war with France. In consequence, he was now dealing with the factors in London to sell his sugar, and the price had plummeted, putting him in debt to a race he despised. He'd spent several years building a second plantation where he could grow coffee, which fetched a better price, lavishing on the plants his every care. I suppose this toil and worry was the reason his patience snapped on discovering my petty misdemeanor.

Calling me into his study the next afternoon, he intoned, "I've had a note, from Sister Celestine, informing me you were not in school yesterday, and don't bother lying about where you were."

I did not, nor had I intended to.

"Létice, you've always been a good girl. You have never been naughty or defiant. But the influence of these new friends, the Ducasses, is causing you to behave as they do, and I won't have it! I haven't inflicted corporal punishment on you since you were eight years old, but I'm afraid you've forced my hand." I was stunned when he added, in a tone I knew better than to defy, "Now, lean over my desk, and lift your skirts." When I demurred, my face flaming, he added quietly, "At once, if you please."

With that he reached down and produced a switch, obviously having already prepared it for my chastening.

I shook my head back and forth, truly appalled that he would do such a thing, but it availed me nothing. Stepping around to my side, he took me by the arm, firmly and with authority, leaning me over the front of his desk. I was, in fact, so shaken that I didn't realize I wore nothing under my muslin day gown. But once I assumed the position of complete submission, my forehead coming to rest on the cool island rosewood of his desktop, he raised my skirts since I had refused, and discovered it for himself.

"Létice Marie!" he thundered. "Just where, may I ask, are your pantalettes?"

I offered no reply, for I had no defense. I'd always detested them, particularly in the jungle heat, the horrid linen drawers inflicted upon their charges by the nuns, for the sake of modesty beneath the thin cotton gowns of fashion. I was seventeen, and no longer a little girl. The great ladies of Paris wore scandalously little beneath their sheer lawn and muslin, and feeling myself now a woman grown, I followed where fashion led.

"You have just earned yourself another ten. And if you were a son, it would be with a leather strap, so count yourself fortunate," he said harshly, and before I could take it in, the switch descended on my bared backside.

It made a swishing sound as it snaked through the air, far softer than the gasp I cried out with the first blow, but this did not deter him. The second fell even sharper, and the whiplash motion of his wrist made the sting worse, like a wasp. I suppose he chose my humiliatingly bared cheeks because to lay it across my back would have been too much a suggestion I was a slave rather than a daughter. I did not agree, for I had come of an age to find my position degrading.

Squirming, I turned my head enough to see part of him, his waist and broad chest, and sensed his movements, his shoulder rising, the muscular arm in his white linen shirt descending

forcefully in a relentless rhythm. Between the gasps I began to moan, twisting helplessly on the desktop to escape him, while his other broad hand spread wide and pressed my back to pin me down.

As the sting blossomed into heat, spreading down toward the inward curve of my bottom, I began to feel something that startled me. Despite the pain, I was growing damp between my legs, and a thrumming ache was born there, the ache I both provoked and eased in bed at night, though it was far more acute. For the first time, I connected that nightly ritual with something else, something occurring in broad daylight. By the tenth blow, despite the searing lacerations that were making my eyes tear, there was a hunger as well, a turbulent excitement as the flesh grew even hotter, more alive to sensation, including a deep craving for the opposite of what it was being given.

When he was done, the final lash laid on with the greatest force, I felt my knees had turned to water, and wasn't certain I could stand. I wished more than anything that he would press his huge hands across my abused cheeks, that he would soothe the reddened welts, and then move downward, between my legs. For the first time, I wanted it to be someone else's hand, and far worse, I desperately wanted it to be his. When I stood, I dared not look him in the face.

Nana used a balm on me that night, all the while agreeing with my father that, though perhaps he'd been too harsh, my friendship with the Ducasse boys, who ran wild as boars, would bring me nothing but disaster. My backside only hurt for a few days, but it burned for months, every time I remembered him towering over me, the evocative motion of his body as he administered his power on my prostrate form. My hand always burrowed between my legs under the sheets, as I sought to bring myself some relief, my imaginings of the other things he might have done vivid, but somehow formless. This made it more tortuous rather than less, for in many ways I didn't know what it was I yearned for, knew only that my

body was stretched out on that rack, tormented by the ephemeral, indistinct longing.

I do know that I found myself making mischief, deliberately, hoping for another session with him behind the closed door of his study. He was an intelligent man, as well as a passionate one, and looking back, I believe he realized the reason for my behavior, that I was “forcing his hand,” pleading for his discipline. And so he began to deny it to me, finding other ways to punish me, in order to keep from overheating my blood.

Yet I still believe the need would have remained formless, had it not been for something Nana let slip to me. She was only in her thirties, with wisdom far beyond her years. A Catholic, she was still a woman of the islands, a *griffe*, part African and part Carawak, the fierce natives who’d killed the first Carib inhabitants and taken the land for their own, before the whites came and did the same to them. A woman of wind and sea and the natural rhythms of life.

I indulged in a cool bath before bed, and as I put on my night rail we gossiped of the planters, particularly Monsieur Fortier of Trois-Îlets. They were, like the Ducasses, *petits blancs*, their small plantation not a prosperous one. They were held in contempt by men like my father, for their feckless ways and lascivious behavior, and their count of bastards was impressive. Nana was an herbalist, conversant with pennyroyal and birthwort, skilled as a Jesuit at brewing fever bark. But she had told me of a simple plant that grew in abundance on the island, called rue, that could be used to force Nature’s hand and bring on a woman’s courses, ensuring, if she’d been taken, that no child would come of it. This treatment being so effective, she had little patience for young women who “whelped bastards by the litter,” as she put it, branding them slovenly and ignorant, with the contempt of the house slaves for the field workers I’d heard so often before.

But that night she was especially scandalized, for she repeated to me the gossip flying over the island from Basse Pointe to Sainte

Anne, that Monsieur Fortier had taken the oldest of them, his own daughter, as his latest concubine, a girl of only fifteen.

I froze, hoping my secret wasn't written across my face, as I asked, with all the insouciance I could manage, if she believed it was true. I felt my face redden when she replied off-handedly she had little doubt it was, for this was not an uncommon thing among the islanders, for a man to take his own daughter, though she'd expected better of the whites, who espoused their principles out of one face and demanded their darkest desires be satisfied from out the other.

I attempted a suitable air of shock, while she defended her people, who sadly were only doing as their ancestors before them had done. This I knew, since it was true as well for many of the ancients, the Egyptians and the Persians. Who better, they thought, to lovingly take a girl's maidenhead than her own father? Who better to take care she not suffer? Who better to learn the secret needs of his own seed, since he would be the one to choose the man she would wed? To me it seemed a logical beginning to womanhood, no matter the shock or outrage it engenders in our own society.

I had been amongst the natives too long, and being motherless, was beginning to take their attitudes as my own. Hearing it spoken aloud, not as a vague fantasy but a thing occurring not ten miles from where I stood, I faced the truth at last about Papa. I wanted to lose my virginity, and I wanted to give it to him.

However, imaginings being one thing and reality another, it took me some little time to lay my fledgling plans for seduction, childish intrigues that would never come to pass. For even if my father had done such a thing, which I gravely doubt, I had waited too long. A serpent had appeared in my Eden. I shouldn't have been surprised. Martinique was more plagued with snakes than any island in that vast, curving chain linking the Americas, even gracing our flag. The early settlers, overwhelmed, had imported a number of odd little creatures called a mongoose, the viper's deadliest

enemy, to bring them under control. But this particular serpent, like the one wrapped around the Tree of Knowledge, was too powerful to be dispatched so easily.

She was a quadroon named Solange Doumier, to whom my father gave over a cottage on our property, situated not far from our house, built for one of the overseers. He explained with solemnity that it was merely his Christian charity, for she had come home with her brother to find she had nowhere to go, their parents having died. As he'd once shared a business venture with Monsieur Doumier, he naturally felt an obligation. I despised her from the moment I saw her, for she was incredibly lovely, her flawless skin the color of rich coffee with pure cream, her enormous golden eyes unsettling, knowing.

And yet, as so many foolish women, I lived on a lie for some time, believing my father had, in truth, offered her a home, not merely from kindness, but so that she, in her turn, could offer companionship to Samuel, another Free Black, my father's trusted overseer and accountant, and I knew that Samuel loved her. He'd even hinted of a marriage between them, a marriage that couldn't come soon enough for me. For the vicious rumor had already reached my ears, from Eugène Ducasse, who took great glee in telling me the little cottage was a rendezvous, not for Samuel, but my father. When he said it, I shoved him, hard, and he landed in the surf, laughing. I wished there had been a shark at hand to swallow him whole.

But I still denied it in my heart. Denied it until the night I watched from my own window as my father moved down the torch-lit path through the constantly encroaching jungle on either side, the palms and immortelles and frangipani trees, their scarlet and orange blooms reflecting back the color of the fire. A path that ended in only one place.

Several grief-stricken days passed, until I came to understand one thing; I had to know. No matter how underhanded the method I used, I had to know the truth.