



Tall cypresses framed the steps that led from La Fiorentina to the Mediterranean. Yacht owners, including Onassis, often moored their yachts here in the bay of Beaulieu.



Two Falconet sphinxes faced each other across the steps leading to the pool at Fiorentina. The heads were modelled on Madame du Barry and Madame du Pompadour.



A frequent guest to Fiorentina in the 1950s: a New Yorker nicknamed Spider Monkey, who became the wife of biographer Peter Quennell.



At Fiorentina, the author surrounded herself with dogs, many of them rescued from shelters.

The stars who came to dinner

Greta Garbo came to dinner and so did Fred Astaire, Elsa Maxwell and Lena Horne. Film stars, aristocrats, artists and writers were lured by the dazzling, much-married Enid Lindeman and her son Rory Cameron to their villa, Fiorentina, on the French Riviera. Meanwhile, the quiet one of the family, daughter Patricia Cavendish O'Neill, kept watch on the glittering throng. Here, an extract from her memoirs.

Fiorentina had been finished to Rory's satisfaction at last, although when we first moved in there it was still covered in scaffolding. After so many years of renovating and rebuilding, Rory simply couldn't wait any longer to establish residence.

As for the three other houses on the point, Mummy lent Le Clos to her great friend, the American socialite and philanthropist Rosita Winston, for the summer months and La Florida was kept as a guest house for the overflow from Fiorentina. La Maison Blanche was rented on a permanent basis to Elvira de la Fuente and her girlfriend at the time. Elvira had a large birthmark just below her lower lip. I heard gossip that when Elvira had a hard night of passion, the lower lip would swell and the birthmark become very visible. I found it difficult not to stare; she wasn't an attractive lady at the best of times. She was a very good bridge player though, which is why my mother let her stay, and she was also a chain-smoker. Rory was determined to move all these rabid bridge players elsewhere, so they would not continue contaminating the pristine beauty of Fiorentina's sitting room with the smell of smoke and ashes all over the floor. He therefore built a pavilion in the forest, overlooking the sea. I can still see him opening all the shutters of the French windows, flapping them back and forth saying, "I can't stand it any longer. The stink in here is unbearable."

It is this very pavilion where, according to south of France gossip and a horrible article in *Vanity Fair* by Dominick Dunne, Mummy is supposed to have left [her third husband, shipping and coal millionaire] Furness to die during the war, locked out of the main house. The pavilion wasn't even built by Rory until after the war; Furness died during the war surrounded by nurses and doctors in the greatest comfort.

It was in this pavilion, however, that I first met Coco Chanel and was fascinated by how marvellous she looked; she was what the French called "*une jolie laide*" and was wearing a white corded suit with blue trimming, a blue blouse to match and rows of pearls to her waist.

Fiorentina was always open to guests. Again, in his book *The Golden Riviera*, Rory described our wonderful visitors' book and I will quote him at length. He wrote: "When we moved into the big house, we decided to keep a strict eye on the visitors' book: signatures and dates, no comments, only professionals would be encouraged to perform. There were the exceptions, Claudette Colbert for one. Not a painter, she nevertheless did a likeness of herself, substituting her head for that of one of the sphinxes guarding the walk down to the sea."

"The visitors' book starts off with a fine flourish, with [the British painter and designer] Graham Sutherland and on the opposite page, a gouache by the master, dated May 1947. Turning the pages brings back fond memories. One is reminded of incidents long since forgotten; the night, for instance, that Irving Penn, the well-known photographer, and his wife came to dinner. I was alone, it was spring and the garden was heady with jasmine and Fiorentina was looking its best, for houses, like people, have their good days. When the guests left, I escorted them to their car and turned to walk the dogs and was surprised when, a few minutes later, they drove back. I hardly knew them, and embarrassed at finding me there, they apologised, "but we had to have one last look".

"I find a page of George Auric's; he has written his initials, composing the letters with the opening bars of his ballet *Les Matelots*. [Author] Louise de Vilmorin's four-leafed clover appears quite often, and [novelist] Romain Gary has copied out a passage from his *Racines du Ciel*. Lesley Blanch, his wife at that period, was an even more frequent visitor, and from her I begged a paragraph or two from the *Sabres of Paradise*, an engrossing study of Shamy! [the 19th-century Muslim resistance leader against the Russians in the Caucasus].



Summers on the Riviera were popular with family friends.



The author's older brother, Rory.



The author's first husband, Australian swimming champion Frank O'Neill. The couple split, then remarried in 1969.



Waterskiing in the bay of Beaulieu, off Fiorentina.



The author, with her beloved dogs.



Getting ready to waterski.



When Villa Fiorentina was remodelled, the inspiration came from the facade of Palladio's Villa Rotunda.



The author.

“Somerset Maugham inscribed a page with worldly advice from his *Writer’s Notebook* and Sacheverell Sitwell evokes the heat with the opening paragraph of *Southern Baroque Art*, and how wonderfully evocative he can be. ‘Six o’clock in the morning,’ he writes, ‘and already the heat of Naples was such that it required confidence to believe in any hours of darkness...’

“[Writer/explorer] Freya Stark is another contributor on the occasions she would drive over when staying on the Italian Riviera. Small, compact, her feet barely reaching the ground when sitting down — coiffed in the latest Reboux hat from Paris, a large blob of a jewel on one finger, she is the last person in the world one would suspect of being an intrepid traveller.

“Of all the pages, the one that gives me the most pleasure is [biographer and critic] Peter Quennell’s inscription copied from *Sign of the Fish*, what he is pleased to call an autobiographical fragment. The passage describes a flight of flamingos viewed from our point during a period of migration and begins: ‘Up the Gulf of Beaulieu, arriving from Italy, came a column of slowly travelling birds — not in extended order as wild geese fly, when they travel at night above the Scottish lowlands, but linked one by one in a gently undulating chain like the floating tail of a vast celestial kite, the drifting streamer that might follow an archangel or a loose ribbon attached to the Chariot of Venus.’

“Quennell has copied out this passage indicating ‘the gently undulating chain’ by a dipping and rising script. It is a beautiful page, and opposite to it Gerald Van der Kemp, the curator-in-chief of Versailles, has done a sensitive study of shells in gouache — a pink strombus and half of a greyish-yellow clam.

“[Writer and critic] Cyril Connolly used also to be a frequent visitor in the days before we moved into the big house, and Cyril was another of those rare creatures able to weave a web of enchantment round the mundanities of everyday life. He would give a whole dissertation on the quality of a Charenton melon...the same for a particular wine, or the virtues of such and such a place for swimming. But he was at his best on the sensuous appeal of objects. He would touch them, hold them, and his passionate concern was such that it gave an added appeal to the object in question.

“Another page in the book is entirely taken up by Sir Frederick Mutesa’s signature. It sprawls in secure English fashion proclaiming the hand of a gentleman. His Highness Mutesa II was the 37th Kabaka of Uganda [in fact, of Buganda, the main province of the country, which had a lot of power because of its history and influence] and had been almost exclusively educated by the British, with two years at Magdalen College, Cambridge, followed by an honorary commission in the Grenadier Guards. His stay at Fiorentina was a question of reciprocity. He had been our host at Kampala [the Ugandan capital] on Mengo, the royal hill [or palace headquarters]. The Kabaka, or King Freddie as he was affectionately termed by the press in London, was a young man of almost 30 when we visited him in the early 1950s [just before he was deposed by the British Governor on November 30, 1953, after a conflict over Uganda’s future]...He had a pleasant, easy manner and a dry sense of humour, and had proved an excellent host; he delegated Prince Harry, his younger brother, to show us the royal tombs, and that same evening had driven us out to his hunting lodge, situated about an hour out of town over a dusty road through acres of sugarcane. He told us that he would have liked to take us swimming, he had his own private lake, ‘but you know, I asked the gamekeeper about the crocodiles and he answered that it was perfectly all right; that there was only one that he knew of. One too many for me!’ laughed the Kabaka. He had a charming, soft-spoken voice, so soft at times that it was difficult to hear him. It was on taking our leave that we had invited him to Fiorentina, promising him, so we thought, a weekend of carefree bathing.

“It was full summer when he arrived with his suite consisting of his brother, a young sister, an aide and several attendants. We all trooped down to the pool. King Freddie was enjoying himself and was in very good form. The ramp of the diving-board was about the height of a chair and if used as such, dominated

the scene. Instinctively the Kabaka installed himself and held court, while the drinks were passed round. The young princess, in the meantime, had joined my brother and sister down by the sea. My brother dived in, to be followed promptly by the royal guest, her immersion taking the form of a wild jump. The sea was so clear that she didn’t realise how deep it was. There ensued a terrible flaying of arms, followed by gasps and the Kabaka, had it not been for my brother, might have lost a possible heir. It appears she had never been swimming before and had been ashamed to admit it. ‘You see,’ the Kabaka laughed, ‘your bathing is not much safer than mine.’

“One name that should have been in the visitors’ book, only I never dared ask her to sign, was Greta Garbo’s. I knew of the occasion when she had been staying with [actress and opera singer] Grace Moore in Connecticut and Miss Moore, to pay her a compliment, had walked up to Garbo after dinner, before they all left for New York, and asked her to be the first to sign. Miss Moore was holding the book open, at the same time offering Garbo a pen. There was a terrible moment of silence and Garbo, in real consternation, like a trapped animal, had looked at the book and then up at her hostess and in almost a whisper said, ‘Oh, no, Grace, I...can’t.’

“Grace Moore, not known for concealing her reactions, was clearly astonished and vexed. Garbo burst into tears. The hesitation on Garbo’s part was not affectation; she has a real phobia about signing her name. Is shy, in fact, about a great many things; refuses, for example, to discuss anything to do with her work and has never been known to pass an opinion on any of her own films, or what the press claims her to be, ‘the most enchantingly mysterious woman of her time’. Had I not known about her before we met, I doubt very much whether I should have noticed anything so different about her, except, of course, for her extraordinary beauty. When down here in the south, Garbo always stayed with George Schlee, a Russian-born American. Schlee was her accepted *chevalier galant*; a pleasant, amusing man, older than Garbo and clever, one heard, on the stock market. I never saw Garbo without him, and it appears that with him she lost much of the timidity that at times turns her into a recluse.

“Garbo loved Fiorentina, felt relaxed there, and laughed a great deal, throwing her head back. It is difficult to describe the effect she had on one: apart from the extraordinary beauty, she wore an aura about her that, like royalty, makes one a little shy. She seldom refers to people by their Christian names, but with that wonderfully resonant voice of hers, with a slight accent, she makes one’s surname sound like a caress. Slowly she pronounces it, teasing, with a slow smile.”

These passages from *The Golden Riviera* make me so nostalgic now and bring back many memories of the glorious years. Amongst all the guests that came yearly, I most enjoyed my Danish friend Eric Nielsen and loved his yearly visits to us. He was very, very fair, immaculately dressed and had a boyfriend who played the piano well. Like many of our regular guests, Eric had a little money of his own and he lived on that. He wrote in his will that he would like his ashes to be scattered off the point of Fiorentina and I understand that [Italian industrialist and head of Fiat] Gianni Agnelli complied with Eric’s last request and took them out in his speedboat.

A procession of film stars like Fred Astaire, Frank Sinatra, Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich would come to lunch or dinner. Some would be brought by friends; often they invited themselves, so much had they heard of Fiorentina. David Niven was there a lot. Other guests included John F. Kennedy, Jean Cocteau, Lady Diana Cooper and Irving Penn — which should give you an idea of just how eclectic the guest list was.

Roderick Coupe and his great friend Jimmy Douglas, a glamour boy from Paris whose father was some big wheel in the American air force, came every year to visit us at Le Clos and later at Fiorentina. In fact, Barbara Hutton thought Jimmy was so glamorous that she begged me to introduce her to

him. I think as a result they had an affair, not that I think it lasted more than a few years, and Barbara gave me a most beautiful pink sapphire and diamond ring to celebrate the occasion. I was particularly fond of both Rod and Jimmy. Rod tells some amusing stories of his visits. One evening there was a really huge dinner, even grander and bigger than usual. At one table were Enid, Rory, society hostess Elsa Maxwell, the Duke of Sutherland, the diplomat and explorer Sir Bede Clifford and some others. At some point in the conversation, Elsa Maxwell, who was rather brash, made some derogatory comment about English titles. Something like “any bloke can be born”. The Duke and Sir Bede, who was the youngest son of the Baron of Chudleigh, took great offence and rounded on her. Elsa Maxwell, who considered herself the doyenne of American society, was absolutely furious. She swept away from the table, saying that Mr Onassis’s car was awaiting her. She was last seen hitching a lift back to Monte Carlo!

Rod had another amusing Elsa Maxwell story. Elsa, who had never picked up a cheque in her life, gave a dinner with John Paul Getty seated at her right. At the time, he was one of the richest men in the world and also an ex-boyfriend of Mummy’s, who said that he was the meanest man she had ever met. During the time of their affair she would always have to pay for everything, even taxi fares. He was too mean to have a car and chauffeur because of the expense of maintaining the car and he had a notepad next to the telephone so that he could keep account of every call. When the bill for the dinner arrived, Elsa pushed it in front of Getty, who immediately pushed it back, saying that it was not his dinner. After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, Enid said very sweetly that she would pay the bill which, with an immense sigh of relief, was quickly shoved in front of her.

Another of Rod’s stories: “Jimmy Douglas had been in Milan and he was there at the time that some very rare mushrooms had become available at one place. He brought them as a present to Fiorentina...Rory was delighted and said that he would save them for Saturday, that they were having a big lunch and they would make a very nice first course. He said he knew exactly how they should be prepared, raw with a vinaigrette sauce. At his table were no less than three duchesses. I sat at the children’s table, although I was in my mid-thirties. One of the young people turned to me and said, ‘Are they supposed to be like this?’

“I looked and to my horror saw that the mushrooms were covered in fine white worms! I glanced around only to see all the adult guests eating and being very complimentary about the delicious mushrooms. In particular, the beautiful Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, was saying to Rory that they were the best she had ever eaten.

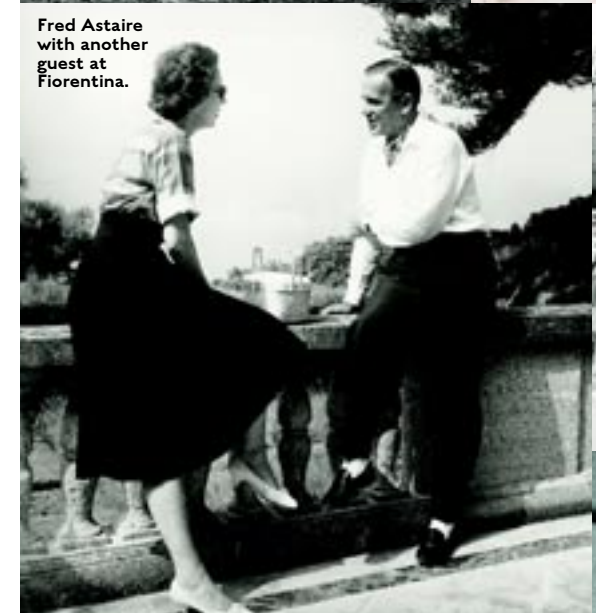
“So I gave up. I don’t suppose it would have harmed anyone.”

Rod also reminded me of the time he was sent to collect Lena Horne, the American singer. Says Rod, “I was asked to go and meet her at the Negresco Hotel where she was staying in Nice. She was absolutely beautiful and I was a great fan of hers. So we drove back to Fiorentina and she asked me if we could stop at the Reserve Hotel and have a drink.

“She said, ‘I am very frightened of meeting the formidable, beautiful Lady Kenmare and I really need something to give me courage.’

“So we had a lovely cocktail there and she was very lively about all these jazz subjects that I was interested in. When we arrived at the house, Enid captured her and took her off to sit at her table. Lena Horne was soon surrounded by Prince and Princess Liechtenstein, Prince Pierre de Polignac and Prince and Princess Chavchavadze, all of whom were paying her court. I could see that she and Enid were getting on famously, and the beautiful Lena Horne had overcome her fright and had settled peacefully among half the minor royalty of Europe.” ■

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Fred Astaire with another guest at Fiorentina.



Princess Elizabeth Chavchavadze and the author's brother Rory at Fiorentina.



The author's mother, Enid, wore couture by day and night.