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# Love in a Cold Climate

NANCY MITFORD

LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE

Nancy Mitford, daughter of Lord and Lady Redesdale and the eldest of the six legendary Mitford sisters, was born in 1904 and educated at home on the family estate in Oxfordshire. She made her debut in London and soon became one of the bright young things of the 1920s, a close friend of Henry Green, Evelyn Waugh, John Betjeman, and their circle. A beauty and a wit, she began writing for magazines and writing novels while she was still in her twenties. In all, she wrote eight novels as well as biographies of Madame de Pompadour, Voltaire, Louis XIV, and Frederick the Great. She died in 1973. More information can be found at [www.nancymitford.com](http://www.nancymitford.com).

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NOVELS BY NANCY MITFORD  
AVAILABLE FROM VINTAGE BOOKS

*Wigs on the Green* (1935)  
*The Pursuit of Love* (1945)  
*Love in a Cold Climate* (1949)  
*The Blessing* (1951)  
*Don't Tell Alfred* (1960)

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*Nancy Mitford*

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LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE



*Introduction by Flora Fraser*



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Copyright

WHEN NANCY MITFORD sent a typescript of *Love in a Cold Climate* in October 1948 to her friend Evelyn Waugh for his comments, he wrote back: “The manuscript was a delight to read, full of wit & fun & fantasy. Whole passages ... might be used verbatim in a book.” But he wanted her to do a complete rewrite before she published: “the book must be saved. So start again.” Nancy declined, but she might so easily have agreed. Waugh had been a close friend since she made her London debut in the 1920s and a regular correspondent since she followed a lover to Paris after the war. He was also one of Britain’s premier novelists and one to whom she often turned for literary advice. Indeed he suggested the title of her earlier novel, *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), as well as the title of *Love in a Cold Climate*, which refers to the seeming inability, for much of the book and to her mother, Lady Montdore’s fury, of beautiful Lady Polly to fall in love or attract any marriage proposals.

Nancy felt bolstered in her refusal to oblige Waugh by the runaway success she had enjoyed with *The Pursuit of Love*. Admittedly the romantic adventures of the Hon. Linda Radlett portrayed there had been extremely autobiographical, and so perhaps easier for her to narrate than *Cold Climate*’s plot involving Lady Polly, the Montdore millions, and Cedric, the Nova Scotia-born heir. But Fanny, or the Hon. Frances Logan, Linda’s cousin and Polly’s friend, was a narrator who had “worked” in *Pursuit* and “works” too in *Cold Climate*. Readers of *Pursuit* had loved too the characters of Uncle Matthew and Aunt Sadie, whom Nancy had based on her parents, Lord and Lady Redesdale. Uncle Matthew and Aunt Sadie played important parts in *Cold Climate*. Mitford had a readership now, and she had found a landscape that could paint and rework.

She had, by her own account, worked hard, very hard, writing and reworking *Cold Climate* before she sent it to Waugh. Even today the sections covering Fanny’s and Polly’s contrasting youths, adolescences and romances read with a frightening wit and fluency. Take Fanny’s awed description of Lady Montdore the morning after a weekend house party ended at Hampton. The hostess was “drinking strong tea in bed among masses of lace pillows, her coarse grey hair frizzed out and wearing what appeared to be a man’s striped flannel pyjama top under a feathered wrap.”

With Polly’s disastrous marriage and the astonishing transformation of her mother, Lady Montdore, following the arrival at Hampton of young Cedric, a darker vein obtrudes. The climax to the book, apparently a happy if sophisticated ending, is like a devastating train crash whose images linger long in the mind. The wonder is that Waugh wanted to tinker with Mitford’s extraordinarily successful and intricate arrangement. Mitford later wrote that she considered *Cold Climate* her best novel.<sup>ii</sup> At any rate now she ignored Waugh’s advice and



published *Love in a Cold Climate* in July 1949 to considerable acclaim.

There were those who found the openly homosexual character Cedric hard to stomach, and *Ladies' Home Journal* refused to serialize the book. But Nancy was pleased with the “human dragonfly” portrait that she had drawn of Cedric, using as her exquisite model the Hon. Stephen Tennant, friend of Cecil Beaton and later supposedly one of the models for Sebastian in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Anyway she was used to controversy, and, having worked at the London bookshop G. Heywood Hill, knew that it helped sell books. Moreover, she was no stranger to outrage. Nancy's mother Lady Redesdale remonstrated at one point in the 1920s: “Whenever I see the words ‘Peer's daughter’ in a headline... I know it's going to be something about one of you children.”<sup>iii</sup>

With the exploits of Nancy's younger sisters—she was the eldest of the six Mitford daughters and older too than their only brother, Tom—we are not concerned here. But there is no doubt that Nancy shocked her parents with her choice of friends, once she had made her debut in London, in the 1920s and 30s. With a variety of writers and aesthetes such as Evelyn Waugh and Harold Acton and other smart or bright young people in attendance, the capital gossip columns avidly in pursuit, Nancy shingled her hair, wore trousers, smoked cigarettes, and wrote the occasional column herself. There was not much money about, much gaiety, many parties, and much offense given to almost everyone of a more traditional outlook.

In particular, the openness about homosexual liaisons within this loose amalgam of revelers and the “camp” appearance of the men in question repulsed many. But at the same time, and as the interwar novels that Nancy's friends wrote—Waugh's *Vile Bodies* and *Handful of Dust*, Henry Green's *Party Going* and Anthony Powell's *Afternoon Men*—bear witness, these Bright Young Things who found their elders and the certainties of prewar England hilarious had not found anything to put in place of those certainties. *Love in a Cold Climate*, though written in Paris and in 1948, both holds its own against the books mentioned above and is witness to that same despair. However, there is one difference: the character of Fanny.

In Fanny Wincham née Logan and in *Cold Climate*, Nancy Mitford developed—as she did not in *Pursuit* where Cousin Linda is the focus—an “I person” whom we accompany through several stages of growth. Fanny is first seen as a nervous adolescent but becomes a willing bride, a confident wife, and loving mother. And her character, the husband she chooses and loves (an Oxford don), and her married home (a North Oxford terraced house) are utterly unlike those of anyone in Nancy's original “set.” Her domestic concerns are quite unlike those of either of the mistress of a grand country house and London residence, or of a Bright Young Thing going to parties and drinking cocktails. There is even, heaven forbid, hardly a servant to create “the servant problem.” “I was obliged to get up very early and cook Alfred's breakfast, but I did not mind. He was my own husband, and the cooking took place in my own kitchen; it all seemed like heaven to me,” writes Fanny in *Cold Climate*.

The reader may think himself or herself fully engaged with the beautiful blankness of Polly, the lecherous attentions of Boy Dougdale, or the tantrums of Lady Montdore. In fact Mitford has us keeping half an eye on Fanny and her fretting that Alfred might read a book or commit some other heinous crime while staying with Uncle Matthew. We are seeing in Fanny the woman that Nancy Mitford might have been, had she married the right man instead of moody, feckless Peter Rodd, had she had the children that agonizingly never appeared, had

she enjoyed prolonged domestic contentment rather than intermittent doses of happiness with the Gaullist politician and womanizer Gaston Palewski. In Fanny Wincham—the choice of name echoes that of Fanny Price, the cousin at Mansfield Park—Mitford created, for all the snobbery that pervades her world, a woman who is truly modern and middleclass in the best sense of the word. Fanny's values are never those of her Radlett cousins at Alconleigh, nor is her head turned by the impossibly magnificent life at Hampton with the Montdorees. For Mitford makes it clear that life is fairly conventional and down-to-earth at home with Aunt Emily and Uncle Davey, who have been to Fanny as mother and father ever since her own mother, "the Bolter," left her father.

Nancy Mitford used to say later in life that she had never loved her mother, and Lady Redesdale, especially to her elder children when they were young, appears to have been a vague and remote figure. In Mitford's depiction of Fanny's relatively "normal" home life before marriage, her marriage to the intelligent, austere Alfred, and her love of her home and family we may see the poignant wish of Nancy Mitford for what might have been. But these were not wishes that she voiced outside of the pages of her book.

For her family as well as for her friends, Nancy Mitford kept up a front. For the public she was the stylish lady writer, photographed in Parisian chic, holidaying in Venice or in the South of France with princes and millionaires. Her correspondence, her conversation were legendary for their verbal fireworks. But after she had died in great pain in Versailles in 1973, tended by the sisters who had loved her but had suffered too from her sarcasm and spikey wit, one of them wrote to another, "I know she had success as a writer but what that compared to things like proper husbands and lovers and children—think of the loneliness of all these years, so *sad*."<sup>iv</sup> Despite all her artistry, in short, there had been no one for whom Nancy came first.

With Fanny, however, and with *Cold Climate* Mitford triumphed. She created someone who always came first with her Alfred, and he with her. The curiosity is that when Mitford went on to write a book exclusively about Fanny, *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960), Fanny no longer came first with her husband. In that novel, Alfred has been appointed British Ambassador to Paris and official duties occupy him. *Don't Tell Alfred* is a hilarious portrait of high society life in Paris and of internal embassy politics, with Fanny's escapades as ambassadress central to the plot but the ambassador himself a largely absent figure and, when present, more irritated than loving. That, however, is another story. Meanwhile glorious *Love in a Cold Climate* awaits.

**Flora Fraser** is the author of *Princesses: The Six Daughters of George III*; *Beloved Emma: The Life of Emma, Lady Hamilton*; *Pauline Bonaparte: Venus of Empire*; and *The Unruly Queen: The Life of Queen Caroline*.

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<sup>i</sup> ed. Charlotte Mosley, *The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh* (London: Sceptre, 1997), pp. 109–110: Evelyn Waugh to Nancy Mitford, October 24, 1948.

<sup>ii</sup> Harold Acton, *Nancy Mitford: The Biography* (London: Gibson Square, 2010), p. 137

<sup>iii</sup> Jessica Mitford, *Hons and Rebels* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 9



# PART ONE

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## Chapter 1

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I AM OBLIGED TO begin this story with a brief account of the Hampton family, because it is necessary to emphasise the fact once and for all that the Hamptons were very grand as well as very rich. A short session with Burke or with Debrett would be quite enough to make this clear, but these large volumes are not always available, while the books on the subject by Lord Montdore's brother-in-law, Boy Dougdale, are all out of print. His great talent for snobbishness and small talent for literature have produced three detailed studies of his wife's forebears, but they can only be read now by asking a bookseller to get them at second hand. (The bookseller will put an advertisement in his trade paper, *The Clique*: "H. Dougdale, author of 'by.'" He will be snowed under with copies at about a shilling each and will then proudly inform his customer that he has "managed to find what you want," implying hours of careful search on barrows, dirt cheap, at 30/- the three.) *Georgiana Lady Montdore and Her Circle*, *The Magnificent Montdore*s and *Old Chronicles of Hampton*, I have them beside me as I write, and see that the opening paragraph of the first is:

"Two ladies, one dark, one fair, both young and lovely, were driving briskly towards the little village of Kensington on a fine May morning. They were Georgiana, Countess of Montdore and her great friend Walburga, Duchess of Paddington, and they made a delightfully animated picture as they discussed the burning question of the hour—should one or should one not subscribe to a parting present for poor dear Princess Lieven?"

This book is dedicated, by gracious permission, to Her Royal Highness, the Grand Duchess Peter of Russia, and has eight full-page illustrations.

IT MUST BE said that when this trilogy first came out it had quite a vogue with the lending-library public.

"The family of Hampton is ancient in the West of England, indeed Fuller, in his *Worthies* mentions it as being of stupendous antiquity."

Burke makes it out just a shade more ancient than does Debrett, but both plunge back into the mists of mediaeval times from which they drag forth ancestors with P. G. Wodehouse names, Ugs and Berts and Threds, and Walter Scott fates. "His Lordship was attainted—beheaded—convicted—proscribed—exiled—dragged from prison by a furious mob—slain at the Battle of Crécy—went down in the White Ship—perished during the third crusade—killed in a duel." There were very few natural deaths to record in the early misty days. Both Bur-

and Debrett linger with obvious enjoyment over so genuine an object as this family, unspotted by the ambiguities of female line and deed poll. Nor could any of those horrid books, which came out in the nineteenth century, devoted to research and aiming to denigrate the nobility, make the object seem less genuine. Tall, golden-haired barons, born in wedlock and all looking very much alike, succeeded each other at Hampton, on lands which had never been bought or sold, generation after generation until, in 1770, the Lord Hampton of the day brought back, from a visit to Versailles, a French bride, a Mademoiselle de Montdore. The son had brown eyes, a dark skin and presumably, for it is powdered in all the pictures of him, black hair. This blackness did not persist in the family. He married a golden-haired heiress from Derbyshire, and the Hamptons reverted to their blue-and-gold looks, for which they are famous to this day. The son of the Frenchwoman was rather clever and very worldly; he dabbled in politics and wrote a book of aphorisms, but his chief claim to fame was his great and lifelong friendship with the Regent, which procured him, among other favours, an earldom. His mother's family having all perished during the Terror in France, he took her name as his title. Enormously rich, he spent enormously; he had a taste for French objects of art and acquired, during the years which followed the Revolution, a splendid collection of such things, including many pieces from the royal establishments, and others which had been looted out of the Hotel de Montdore in the rue de Varenne. To make a suitable setting for this collection, he then proceeded to pull down at Hampton the large plain house that Adam had built for his grandfather and to drag over to England stone by stone (as modern American millionaires are supposed to do) a Gothic French chateau. This he assembled round a splendid tower of his own designing, covered the walls of the rooms with French panelling and silk, and set it in a formal landscape which he also designed and planted himself. It was all very grand and very mad, and in the between wars period of which I write, very much out of fashion. "I suppose it is beautiful," people used to say, "but frankly I don't admire it."

This Lord Montdore also built Montdore House in Park Lane and a castle on a crag in Aberdeenshire. He was really much the most interesting and original character the family produced, but no member of it deviated from a tradition of authority. A solid, worthy, powerful Hampton can be found on every page of English history, his influence enormous in the West of England and his counsels not unheeded in London.

The tradition was carried on by the father of my friend, Polly Hampton. If an Englishman could be descended from the gods it would be he, so much the very type of English nobleman that those who believed in aristocratic government would always begin by pointing to him as a justification of their argument. It was generally felt, indeed, that if there were more people like him the country would not be in its present mess, even Socialists conceding his excellence, which they could afford to do since there was only one of him and he was getting on. A scholar, a Christian, a gentleman, finest shot in the British Isles, best-looking Viceroy we ever sent to India, a popular landlord, a pillar of the Conservative Party, a wonderful old man, in short, who nothing common ever did or mean. My cousin Linda and I, two irreverent little girls whose opinion makes no odds, used to think that he was a wonderful old fraud and it seemed to us that in that house it was Lady Montdore who really counted. Now Lady Montdore was forever doing common things and mean, and she was intensely unpopular, quite as much disliked as her husband was loved, so that anything he might do that was considered not quite worthy of him, or which did not quite fit in with his reputation, was

immediately laid at her door. "Of course she made him do it." On the other hand, I have often wondered whether without her to bully him and push him forward and plot an intrigue for him and "make him do it," whether, in fact, without the help of those very attributes which caused her to be so much disliked, her thick skin and ambition and boundless driving energy, he would ever have done anything at all noteworthy in the world.

This is not a popular theory. I am told that by the time I really knew him, after they got back from India, he was already tired out and had given up the struggle, and that when he was in his prime he had not only controlled the destinies of men but also the vulgarities of his wife. I wonder. There was an ineffectiveness about Lord Montdore which had nothing to do with age; he was certainly beautiful to look at, but it was an empty beauty, like that of a woman who has no sex appeal; he looked wonderful and old, but it seemed to me that, in spite of the fact that he still went regularly to the House of Lords, attended the Privy Council, sat on many committees, and often appeared in the Birthday Honours, he might just as well have been made of cardboard.

Lady Montdore, however, was flesh and blood all right. She was born a Miss Perrotte, the handsome daughter of a country squire of small means and no particular note, so that her marriage to Lord Montdore was a far better one than she could reasonably have been expected to make. As time went on, when her worldly greed and snobbishness, her terrible relentless rudeness had become proverbial and formed the subject of many a legendary tale, people were inclined to suppose that her origins must have been low or transatlantic, but, in fact, she was perfectly well born and had been decently brought up, what used to be called "a lady," so that there were no mitigating circumstances, and she ought to have known better.

No doubt her rampant vulgarity must have become more evident and less controlled with the years. In any case, her husband never seemed aware of it and the marriage was a success. Lady Montdore soon embarked him upon a public career, the fruits of which he was able to enjoy without much hard work, since she made it her business to see that he was surrounded by a host of efficient underlings, and though he pretended to despise the social life which gave meaning to her existence, he put up with it very gracefully, exercising a natural talent for agreeable conversation and accepting as his due the fact that people thought him wonderful.

"Isn't Lord Montdore wonderful? Sonia, of course, is past a joke, but he is so brilliant, such a dear, I do love him."

The people who benefited by their hospitality were fond of pretending that it was solely on his account that they ever went to the house at all, but this was great nonsense because the lively quality, the fun of Lady Montdore's parties had nothing whatever to do with him, and as hateful as she may have been in many ways, she excelled as a hostess.

In short, they were happy together and singularly well suited. But for years they suffered one serious vexation in their married life: they had no children. Lord Montdore minded this because he naturally wanted an heir, as well as for more sentimental reasons. Lady Montdore minded passionately. Not only did she also want an heir, but she disliked any form of failure; she could not bear to be thwarted and was eager for an object on which she could concentrate such energy as was not absorbed by society and her husband's career. They had been married nearly twenty years, and quite given up all idea of having a child when Lady Montdore began

to feel less well than usual. She took no notice, went on with her usual occupations and was only two months before it was born that she realized she was going to have a baby. She was clever enough to avoid the ridicule which often attaches to such a situation by pretending to have kept the secret on purpose, so that instead of roaring with laughter, everybody said, "Isn't Sonia absolutely phenomenal?"

I know all this because my uncle Davey Warbeck has told me. Having himself for many years suffered (or enjoyed) most of the distempers in the medical dictionary, he is very well up in nursing-home gossip.

The fact that the child, when it was born, turned out to be a daughter, never seems to have troubled the Montdorees at all. It is possible that, as Lady Montdore was under forty when she was born, they did not at first envisage her as an only child and by the time they realized that they would never have another, they loved her so much that the idea of her being in any way different, a different person, a boy, had become unthinkable. Naturally they would have liked to have had a boy, but only if it could have been as well as, and not instead of, Polly. She was their treasure, the very hub of their universe.

Polly Hampton had beauty, and this beauty was her outstanding characteristic. She was one of those people you cannot think of except in regard to their looks which, in her case, were unvarying, independent of clothes, of age, of circumstances and even of health. When ill or tired, she merely looked fragile, but never yellow, withered or diminished; she was born beautiful and never, at any time when I knew her, went off or became less beautiful, but on the contrary her looks always steadily improved. The beauty of Polly and the importance of her family are essential elements of this story. But, whereas the Hamptons can be studied in various books of reference, it is not much use turning to old *Tatlers* and seeing Polly and Lenare, as Dorothy Wilding saw her. The bones, of course, are there; hideous hats, old-fashioned poses cannot conceal them; the bones and the shape of her face are always in perfection. But beauty is more, after all, than bones, for, while bones belong to death and endure after decay, beauty is a living thing; it is, in fact, skin deep, blue shadows on a white skin, hair falling like golden feathers on a white smooth forehead, embodied in the movement, in the smile and, above all, in the regard of a beautiful woman. Polly's regard was a blue flash, the bluest and most sudden thing I ever saw, so curiously unrelated to the act of seeing that it was almost impossible to believe that those opaque blue stones observed, assimilated, or did anything except confer a benefit upon the object of their direction.

No wonder her parents loved her. Even Lady Montdore, who would have been a terrible mother to an ugly girl, or to an eccentric, wayward boy, had no difficulty in being perfect to a child who must, it seemed, do her great credit in the world and crown her ambition literally, perhaps, crown. Polly was certainly destined for an exceptional marriage—was Lady Montdore not envisaging something very grand indeed when she gave her the name Leopoldina? Had this not a royal, a vaguely Coburg flavour which might one day be most suitable? Was she dreaming of an altar, an Archbishop, a voice saying, "I, Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David take thee Leopoldina"? It was not an impossible dream. On the other hand, nothing could be more wholesome and unpretentious than "Polly."

MY COUSIN LINDA Radlett and I used to be borrowed from a very early age to play with Polly, for



as so often happens with the parents of only children, the Montdores were always much preoccupied with her possible loneliness. I know that my own adopted mother, Aunt Emily, had the same feeling about me and would do anything rather than keep me alone with her during the holidays. Hampton Park is not far from Linda's home, Alconleigh, and she and Polly, being more or less of an age, seemed destined to become each other's greatest friends. For some reason, however, they never really took to each other much, while Lady Montdore disliked Linda, and as soon as she was able to converse at all pronounced her conversation "unsuitable." I can see Linda now, at luncheon in the big dining room at Hampton (the dining room in which I have, at various times in my life been so terrified, that its very smell, a bouquet left by a hundred years of rich food, rich wine, rich cigars and rich women, is still to me as the smell of blood is to an animal), I can hear her loud singsong Radlett voice, "Did you ever have worms, Polly? I did. You can't imagine how fidgetty they are. Then, oh, the heaven of it, Doctor Simpson came and wormed me. Well, you know how Doc Simp has always been the love of my life—so you do see ..."

This was too much for Lady Montdore and Linda was never asked to stay again. But I went for a week or so almost every holiday, packed off there on my way to or from Alconleigh, and my children are, without ever being asked if I enjoyed it or wanted to go. My father was related to Lord Montdore through his mother. I was a well-behaved child, and I think Lady Montdore quite liked me; anyhow, she must have considered me "suitable," a word which figured prominently in her vocabulary, because at one moment there was a question of my going to live there during the term, to do lessons with Polly. When I was thirteen, however, they went off to govern India, after which Hampton and its owners became a dim, though always alarming, memory to me.

**B**Y THE TIME the Montdores and Polly returned from India, I was grown-up and had already had a season in London. Linda's mother, my Aunt Sadie (Lady Alconleigh), had taken Linda and me out together, that is to say, we went to a series of debutante dances where the people we met were all as young and as shy as we were ourselves, and the whole thing smelt strongly of bread and butter; it was quite unlike the real world, and almost as little of a preparation for it as children's parties are. When the summer ended Linda became engaged to be married and I went back to my home in Kent, to another aunt and uncle, Aunt Emily and Uncle Davey, who had relieved my own divorced parents of the boredom and the burden of bringing up a child.

I was finding it dull at home, as young girls do, when, for the first time, they have neither lessons nor parties to occupy their minds, and then one day into this dullness fell an invitation to stay at Hampton in October. Aunt Emily came out to find me—I was sitting in the garden—with Lady Montdore's letter in her hand.

“Lady Montdore says it will be rather a grown-up affair, but she particularly wants you and company for Polly. She says there will be two young men for you girls, of course. Oh, what a pity it happens to be Davey's day for getting drunk. I long to tell him, he'll be so much interested.”

There was nothing for it, however, but to wait. Davey had quite passed out and his stertorous breathing could be heard all over the house. Davey's lapses into insobriety had no vice about them; they were purely therapeutic. The fact is he was following a new regime for perfect health, much in vogue at that time, he assured us, on the Continent.

“The aim is to warm up your glands with a series of jolts. The worst thing in the world for the body is to settle down and lead a quiet little life of regular habits; if you do that it soon resigns itself to old age and death. Shock your glands, force them to react, startle them back into youth, keep them on tiptoe so that they never know what to expect next, and they have to keep young and healthy to deal with all the surprises.”

Accordingly, he ate in turns like Gandhi and like Henry VIII, went for ten-mile walks or lay in bed all day, shivered in a cold bath or sweated in a hot one. Nothing in moderation. “It is also very important to get drunk every now and then.” Davey, however, was too much of one for regular habits to be irregular otherwise than regularly, so he always got drunk at the full moon. Having once been under the influence of Rudolph Steiner, he was still very conscious of the waxing and waning of the moon and had, I believe, a vague idea that the waxing and waning of the capacity of his stomach coincided with its periods.

Uncle Davey was my one contact with the world, not the world of bread-and-butter misse but the great wicked world itself. Both my aunts had renounced it at an early age so that, for them, its existence had no reality, while their sister, my mother, had long since disappeared from view into its maw. Davey, however, had a modified liking for it, and often made little bachelor excursions into it from which he would return with a bag of interesting anecdotes. I could hardly wait to have a chat with him about this new development in my life.

“Are you sure he’s too drunk, Aunt Emily?”

“Quite sure, dear. We must leave it until to-morrow.”

Meanwhile she wrote (she always answered letters by return of post) and accepted. But the next day when Davey re-appeared looking perfectly green and with an appalling headache (“Oh, but that’s splendid, don’t you see, such a challenge to the metabolism, I’ve just spoken to Dr. England and he is most satisfied with my reaction”), he was rather doubtful whether she had been right to do so.

“My darling Emily, the child will die of terror, that’s all,” he said. He was examining Lady Montdore’s letter. I knew quite well that what he said was true. I had known it in my heart ever since Aunt Emily had read me the letter, but nevertheless I was determined to go; the idea had a glittering fascination for me.

“I’m not a child any longer, Davey,” I said.

“Grown-up people have died of terror at Hampton before now,” he replied. “Two young men for Fanny and Polly, indeed! Two old lovers of two of the old ladies there, if I know anything about it. What a look, Emily! If you intend to launch this poor child in high society you must send her away armed with knowledge of the facts of life, you know. But I really don’t understand what your policy is. First of all, you take care that she should only meet the most utterly innocuous people, keep her nose firmly to Pont Street—quite a point of view, don’t think I’m against it for a moment—but then all of a sudden you push her off the rock into Hampton and expect that she will be able to swim.”

“Your metaphors Davey—it’s all those spirits,” Aunt Emily said, crossly for her.

“Never mind the spirits and let me tell poor Fanny the form. First of all, dear, I must explain that it’s no good counting on these alleged young men to amuse you, because they won’t have any time to spare for little girls, that’s quite certain. On the other hand, who is sure to be there is the Lecherous Lecturer, and, as you are probably still just within his age group, there’s no saying what fun and games you may not have with him.”

“Oh, Davey,” I said, “you are dreadful.”

The Lecherous Lecturer was Boy Dougdale. The Radlett children had given him this name after he had once lectured at Aunt Sadie’s Women’s Institute. The lecture, it seemed, (I was not there at the time) had been very dull, but the things the lecturer did afterwards to Linda and Jassy were not dull at all.

“You know what secluded lives we lead,” Jassy had told me when next I was at Alconleigh. “Naturally it’s not very difficult to arouse our interest. For example, do you remember the dear old man who came and lectured on the Toll Gates of England and Wales? It was rather tedious, but we liked it—he’s coming again, Green Lanes this time.... Well, the Lecherous Lecturer’s lecture was duchesses and, of course, one always prefers people to gates. But the

fascinating thing was after the lecture he gave us a foretaste of sex. Think what a thrill! I took Linda up onto the roof and did all sorts of blissful things to her; at least she could easily see how they would be blissful with anybody except the Lecturer. And I got some great sex pinches as he passed the nursery landing when he was on his way down to dine. Do admit it, Fanny."

Of course my Aunt Sadie had no inkling of all this, she would have been perfectly horrified. Both she and Uncle Matthew always had very much disliked Mr. Dougdale, and, when speaking of the lecture, she said it was exactly what she would have expected, snobbish, dreary and out of place with a village audience, but she had such difficulty filling up the Women's Institute programme month after month in such a remote district that when he had himself written and suggested coming she had thought, "Oh, well ...!" No doubt she supposed that her children called him the Lecherous Lecturer for alliterative rather than factual reasons, and, indeed, with the Radletts you never could tell. Why, for instance, would Victoria bellow like a bull and half kill Jassy whenever Jassy said, in a certain tone of voice pointing her finger with a certain look, "Fancy?" I think they hardly knew why, themselves.

When I got home I told Davey about the Lecturer, and he had roared with laughter but said I was not to breathe a word to Aunt Emily or there would be an appalling row and the one who would really suffer would be Lady Patricia Dougdale, Boy's wife.

"She has enough to put up with as it is," he said, "and besides, what would be the good? Those Radletts are clearly heading for one bad end after another, except that for them nothing ever will be the end. Poor dear Sadie just doesn't realize what she has hatched out for herself, luckily for her."

All this happened a year or two before the time of which I am writing and the name of the Lecturer for Boy Dougdale had passed into the family language so that none of us children ever called him anything else, and even the grown-ups had come to accept it, though Aunt Sadie, as a matter of form, made an occasional vague protest. It seemed to suit him perfectly.

"Don't listen to Davey," Aunt Emily said. "He's in a very naughty mood. Another time we'll wait for the waning moon to tell him these things. He's only really sensible when he's fasting, I've noticed. Now we shall have to think about your clothes, Fanny. Sonia's parties are always so dreadfully smart. I suppose they'll be sure to change for tea? Perhaps if we dye your Ascot dress a nice dark shade of red that would do? It's a good thing we've got nearly a month."

Nearly a month was indeed a comforting thought. Although I was bent on going to the house party, the very idea of it made me shake in my shoes with fright, not so much as the result of Davey's teasing as because ancient memories of Hampton now began to revive with force, memories of my childhood visits there and of how little, really, I had enjoyed them. Downstairs had been so utterly terrifying. It might be supposed that nothing could frighten somebody accustomed, as I was, to a downstairs inhabited by my uncle Matthew Alconleigh. But that rumbustious ogre, that eater of little girls was by no means confined to one part of his house. He raged and roared about the whole of it, and indeed the safest place to be in, as far as he was concerned, was downstairs in Aunt Sadie's drawing room, since she alone had any control over him. The terror at Hampton was of a different quality, icy and dispassionate, and it reigned downstairs. You were forced down into it after tea, frilled up

washed and curled, when quite little, or in a tidy frock when older, into the Long Gallery where there would seem to be dozens of grown-ups, all, usually, playing bridge. The worst of bridge is that out of every four people playing it, one is always at liberty to roam about and say kind words to little girls.

Still, on the whole, there was not much attention to spare from the cards and we could sit on the long white fur of the polar bear in front of the fireplace, looking at a picture book propped against its head, or just chatting to each other until welcome bedtime. It quite often happened, however, that Lord Montdore, or Boy Dougdale, if he was there, would give up playing in order to amuse us. Lord Montdore would read aloud from Hans Andersen or Lewis Carroll and there was something about the way he read that made me squirm with secret embarrassment; Polly used to lie with her head on the bear's head, not listening, I believe, to a single word. It was far worse when Boy Dougdale organized hide and seek or sardines, two games of which he was extremely fond, and which he played in what Linda and I considered a stchoopid way. The word stupid, pronounced like that, had a meaning of its own in our language when we (the Radletts and I) were little; it was not until after the Lecturer's lecture that we realized its full implication and that Boy Dougdale had not been stupid so much as lecherous.

When bridge was in progress, we would at least be spared the attention of Lady Montdore who, even when dummy, had eyes for nothing but the cards; but if by chance there should not be a four staying in the house she would make us play racing demon, a game which has always given me an inferiority feeling because I do pant along so slowly.

"Hurry up, Fanny—we're all waiting for that seven, you know, don't be so moony, dear."

She always won at demon by hundreds, never missing a trick. She never missed a detail of one's appearance, either—the shabby old pair of indoor shoes, the stockings that did not quite match each other, the tidy frock too short and too tight, grown out of, in fact—it was all chalked up on the score.

That was downstairs. Upstairs was all right, perfectly safe, anyhow, from intrusion, the nursery being occupied by nurses, the schoolroom by governesses and neither being subject to visits from the Montdorees who, when they wished to see Polly, sent for her to go to them. But it was rather dull, not nearly as much fun as staying at Alconleigh. No Hons' cupboard (the Hons was the Radlett secret society and the Hons' cupboard its headquarters), no talking bawdy, no sallies into the woods to hide the steel traps or to unstop an earth, no nests of baby bats being fed with fountain-pen fillers in secret from the grown-ups, who had absurd ideas about bats, that they were covered with vermin, or got into your hair. Polly was withdrawn, formal little girl, who went through her day with the sense of ritual, the poise and the absolute submission to etiquette of a Spanish Infanta. You had to love her, she was so beautiful and so friendly, but it was impossible to feel very intimate with her.

She was the exact opposite of the Radletts, who always "told" everything. Polly "told" nothing, and if there were anything to tell it was all bottled up inside her. When Lord Montdore once read us the story of the Snow Queen (I could hardly listen, he put in so much expression) I remember thinking that it must be about Polly and that she surely had a glass splinter in her heart. For what did she love? That was the great puzzle to me. My cousins and I poured out love, we lavished it to right and to left, on each other, on the grown-ups, on

variety of animals and, above all, on the characters (often historical or even fictional) with whom we were *in* love. There was no reticence, and we all knew everything there was to know about each other's feelings for every other creature, whether real or imaginary. There were the shrieks. Shrieks of laughter and happiness and high spirits which always resounded through Alconleigh, except on the rare occasions when there were floods. It was shrieks or floods in that house, usually shrieks. But Polly did not pour or lavish or shriek, and I never saw her in tears. She was always the same, always charming, sweet and docile, politely interested in what one said, rather amused by one's jokes, but all without exuberance and without superlatives, and certainly without any confidences.

Nearly a month then to this visit about which my feelings were so uncertain. All of a sudden, not only not nearly a month but now, to-day, now this minute, and I found myself being whirled through the suburbs of Oxford in a large black Daimler. One mercy, I was alone, and there was a long drive, some twenty miles, in front of me. I knew the road well from my hunting days in that neighbourhood. Perhaps it would go on nearly for ever. Lady Montdore's writing paper was headed Hampton Place, Oxford, station Twyfold. But Twyfold with the change and hour's wait at Oxford which it involved, was only inflicted upon such people as were never likely to be in a position to get their own back on Lady Montdore or anybody for whom she had the slightest regard being met at Oxford. "Always be civil to the girls, you never know who they may marry," is an aphorism which has saved many an English spinster from being treated like an Indian widow.

So I fidgetted in my corner, looking out at the deep intense blue dusk of autumn, profoundly wishing that I could be safe back at home or going to Alconleigh or, indeed, anywhere rather than to Hampton. Well-known landmarks kept looming up; it got darker and darker but I could just see the Merlinford road, branching off with a big sign post, and then, in a moment, or so it seemed, we were turning in at lodge gates. Horrors! I had arrived.

A SCRUNCH OF GRAVEL, the car gently stopped and exactly as it did so the front door opened, casting a panel of light at my feet. Once inside, the butler took charge of me, removed my nutria coat (a coming-out present from Davey), led me through the hall, under the great steel Gothic double staircase up which rushed a hundred steps, halfway to heaven, meeting at a marble group which represented the sorrows of Niobe, through the octagonal ante-chamber through the green drawing room and the red drawing room into the Long Gallery where, without asking it, he pronounced my name, very loud and clear, and then abandoned me.

The Long Gallery was, as I always remember it being, full of people. There were perhaps twenty or thirty on this occasion, a few very old ones, contemporaries of Lady Montdore sitting stiffly round a tea table by the fire, while further down the room, glasses instead of cups in their hands, the rest of the party stood watching games of backgammon. Younger than Lady Montdore, they still seemed elderly to me, being about the age of my own mother. They were chattering like starlings in a tree, did not stop their chatter when I came in, when Lady Montdore introduced me to them, merely broke off what they were saying, stared at me for a moment and went straight on again. However, when she pronounced my name, one of them said,

“Not the Bolter’s daughter?”

I was quite accustomed to hearing my mother referred to as the Bolter, indeed nobody, not even her own sisters, ever called her anything else, so, when Lady Montdore paused with a disapproving look at the speaker, I piped up, “Yes.”

It then seemed as though all the starlings rose in the air and settled on a different tree, and that tree was me.

“The Bolter’s girl?”

“Don’t be funny—how could the Bolter have a grown-up daughter?”

“Veronica, do come here a minute, do you know who this is? She’s the Bolter’s daughter—that’s all.”

“Come and have your tea, Fanny,” said Lady Montdore. She led me to the tea table and the starlings went on with their chatter about my mother in egggy-peggy, a language I happened to know quite well.

“Eggis sheggee reggeally, peggoor sweggeet! I couldn’t be more interested, naturally, when you come to think of it, considering that the very first person the Bolter ever bolted with was my husband—wasn’t it, Chad? Tiny me got you next, didn’t I, my angel, but not until she

had bolted away from you again.”

“I don’t believe it. The Bolter can’t be more than thirty-six. I know she can’t, we used to go to Miss Vacani together, and you used to come, too, Roly—couldn’t remember it better—poker and tongs on the floor for the sword dance and Roly in his tiny kilt. What do you say, darling—can she be more than thirty-six?”

“That’s right. Do the sum, birdbrain. She married at eighteen, eighteen and eighteen and thirty-six. Correct—no?”

“Well, steady on though, how about the nine months?”

“Not nine, darling, nothing like nine, don’t you remember how bogus it all was and how shamefully huge her bouquet had to be, poor sweet? It was the whole point.”

“Careful, Veronica. Really, Veronica always goes too far. Come on, let’s finish the game...”

I had half an ear on this rivetting conversation, and half on what Lady Montdore was saying. Having given me a characteristic and well-remembered look, up and down, a look which told me what I knew too well, that my tweed skirt bulged behind and why had I no gloves? (why, indeed, left them in the motor no doubt and how would I ever have the courage to ask for them?), said in a most friendly way that I had changed more in five years than Polly had, but that Polly was now much taller than I. How was Aunt Emily? And Davey?

“You’ll have your tea?” she said.

That was where her charm lay. She would suddenly be nice just when it seemed that she was about to go for you tooth and nail; it was the charm of a purring puma. She now sent one of the men off to look for Polly.

“Playing billiards with Boy, I think,” and poured me out a cup of tea.

“And here,” she said, to the company in general, “is Montdore.”

She always called her husband Montdore to those she regarded as her equals, but in borderline cases such as the estate agent or Dr. Simpson he was Lord Montdore, if not Her Lordship. I never heard her refer to him as “my husband.” It was all part of the attitude of life that made her so generally un-beloved, a determination to show people what she considered to be their proper place and keep them in it.

The chatter did not continue while Lord Montdore, radiating wonderful oldness, came into the room. It stopped dead, and those who were not already standing up, respectfully did so. He shook hands all round, a suitable word for each in turn.

“And this is my friend Fanny? Quite grown-up now, and do you remember that last time I saw you, we were weeping together over the ‘Little Match Girl’?”

Perfectly untrue, I thought. Nothing about human beings ever had the power to move me as a child. *Black Beauty* now ...!

He turned to the fire, holding his thin white hands which shook a little to the blaze, while Lady Montdore poured out his tea. There was a long silence in the room. Presently he took a scone, buttered it, put it in his saucer, and turning to another old man said, “I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

They sat down together, talking in low voices, and by degrees the starling chatter broke



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