
Opening Extract from...

Wait for Me!

Memoirs of the Youngest Mitford Sister

Written by Deborah Devonshire

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I

We Are Seven

BLANK. THERE IS no entry in my mother's engagement book for 31 March 1920, the day I was born. The next few days are also blank. The first entry in April, in large letters, is 'KITCHEN CHIMNEY SWEPT'. My parents' dearest wish was for a big family of boys; a sixth girl was not worth recording. 'Nancy, Pam, Tom, Diana, Bobo, Decca, *me*', intoned in a peculiar voice, was my answer to anyone who asked where I came in the family.

The sisters were at home and Tom was at boarding school for this deeply disappointing event, more like a funeral than a birth. Years later Mabel, our parlourmaid, told me, 'I knew what it was by your father's face.' When the telegram arrived Nancy announced to the others, 'We Are Seven', and wrote to Muv at our London house, 49 Victoria Road, Kensington, where she was lying-in, 'How disgusting of the poor darling to go and be a girl.' Life went on as though nothing had happened and all agreed that no one, except Nanny, looked at me till I was three months old and then were not especially pleased by what they saw.

Grandfather Redesdale's huge house and estate in Gloucestershire, Batsford Park near Moreton-in-Marsh, was inherited by my father in 1916. It was too expensive to keep up and was sold in 1919. My father looked for somewhere more modest near Swinbrook, a small village where he owned land, fifteen miles from Batsford. There was no house there suitable for a family of six children and a seventh on the way, so he bought Asthall Manor in the neighbouring village. I was born soon after the move and my earliest recollections are of the ancient house and its immediate surroundings. Asthall is a typical Cotswold manor, hard by the

church, with a garden that descends to the River Windrush. It was loved by my sisters and Tom, and the seven years spent there were probably the happiest for parents and children, the proceeds of the sale of Batsford giving the family a feeling of security that was never repeated.

There was, and is, something profoundly satisfying in the scale of Asthall village. It was a perfect entity where every element was in proportion to the rest: the manor, the vicarage, the school and pub; the farmhouses with their conveniently placed cowsheds and barns; the cottages, whose occupants supplied the labour for the centuries-old jobs that still existed when we were children; and the pigsties, chicken runs and gardens that belonged to the cottages. Before cars and commuters, you lived close to where you worked and the shops came to you in horse-drawn vans. This was the calm background of a self-contained agricultural parish, regulated by the seasons, in an exceptionally beautiful part of England.

My father planted woods to hold game, as well as a short beech avenue leading up to the house, and his dark purple lilacs outside the garden wall are still growing there after nearly a hundred years. The house itself needed much restoration. My mother's flair for decoration and her talent for home-making ensured that the French furniture and pictures from Batsford were shown at their best. My father installed water-powered electric light – just the sort of contraption he adored; drawing heavily on his umpteenth cigarette, he would lean over the engineer, itching to do the job better himself. He made sure he had a child-proof door to his study by putting the handle high up out of reach. Sometimes we heard the voice of Galli-Curci singing Farve's favourite aria, coming loudly from the outsize horn of his gramophone – a twin of the one in advertisements for His Master's Voice. In another mood he might put on 'The Diver' ('He is now on the surface, he's gasping for breath, so pale that he wants but the stillness of death'), sung by Signor Foli in a terrifying and unnaturally low bass voice.

With foresight, or perhaps by luck, Farve converted the barn a few yards from the house into one large room with four bedrooms above and added a covered passage, 'the cloisters', to connect

the two buildings. Tom and the older sisters lived in the barn, untroubled by grown-ups or babies, and made the most of their freedom. My father, who was famous for having read only one book, *White Fang*, which he enjoyed so much he vowed never to read another, entrusted Tom, aged ten, with the task of choosing which books to keep from the Batsford library. Nancy and Diana later said that if they had any education, it was due to the unrestricted access they had had to Grandfather's books at Asthall. Later, a grand piano arrived for Tom who showed great musical promise. Music and reading were his passions.

The First World War was not long over and life for the survivors was limping back to normal. There was little to record in our family in the first few years of my life. Nancy went to Hatherop Castle, a finishing school near by, and was taken to Paris with a group of friends where she first saw the architecture and works of art that inspired in her a lifelong love of that city. She wrote enthusiastic letters to our mother about the shops, the food and the days spent at the Louvre. Pam busied herself with her ponies, pigs and dogs. Tom was at Lockers Park prep school in Hemel Hempstead. His orderly mind was already preparing for a career in the Law and he paid Nancy to argue with him all day during the holidays. Diana was an unwilling Girl Guide and played the organ in church, putting into practice her theory that 'Tea for Two', if played slowly enough, did very well as a voluntary.

The years at Asthall passed in a haze of contentment from my point of view. I was aware of The Others but they were so old and seemed to Decca (Jessica, my daily companion) and me to be of another world. It was not until later that I got to know them. Unity, next up in age from Decca and not yet in the schoolroom, made her huge presence felt but, although always kind to me, she was not an intimate. Our life in the nursery consisted of the daily round, the common task, secure and regular as clockwork.

At the age of five we started lessons with Muv, who followed the admirable Parents' National Education Union (PNEU) system with its emphasis on learning through direct contact with nature

and good books, and its disapproval of marks, prizes, rewards and exams. She taught us reading, writing and sums, and read us tales from the famous children's history book, *Our Island Story*. She was a natural teacher and never made anything seem too difficult. At the age of eight, I moved on to the schoolroom and a governess (trained at the PNEU's Ambleside College) and never enjoyed lessons again.

Our nursery windows overlooked the churchyard with its graves of wool merchants long since dead, the beautiful tombs topped with fleeces carved in stone. We were fascinated by funerals, which we were not meant to watch but of course did. Decca and I once fell into a newly dug grave, to the delight of Nancy who pronounced fearful bad luck on us for ever. At that age, I was sure Farve would be buried by the path leading to our garden and even today I expect to see his big toe sticking up through the turf, which is what he warned me would happen if I misbehaved.

Beyond the churchyard to the left were stables, kennels and a garage. Early on at Asthall my father had a horrible accident in the stable yard: he was getting on to a young horse when it reared and fell backwards on to him, breaking his pelvis. The injury did not heal properly and, unable to throw his leg over a saddle, he never rode again. To the right of the churchyard was the vicarage. We adored the vicar's wife and long after we had left Asthall, Pam and I used to ride over and trot briskly up the drive, shouting for ginger biscuits. Across the road was the kitchen garden with its glasshouses and glorious white peaches, reserved strictly for grown-ups. Unity and our cousin Chris Bailey committed the heinous crime of sneaking into the greenhouse and stealing some peaches. There was a stony silence throughout the house while they were reprimanded by my father, which made a big effect on the younger ones. Farve has gone down in history as a violent man, mainly because of Nancy's portrayal of him as the irascible Uncle Matthew in her novels. While he could indeed get angry, he was never physically violent and his bark was far worse than his bite. We would tease him, goad him as far as we dared, until he turned and roared at us.

As soon as I could walk I shadowed Farve, struggling to keep up. He used to pick me up, throw me on to his shoulder and carry me over winter ditches and summer stinging nettles; the comforting feel of his velveteen waistcoat is inseparable from my memories of him. I must have been a great nuisance, but we saw eye to eye about everything. He took me fishing in the magic moment of the year when the mayfly were hatching and let me carry his net. As time went by, he showed me how to slide it under the hooked trout – no talking, no jerking – and land it on the bank. The sound of a reel when a line is cast on a trout rod equals early summer to me and the smell of newly cut grass, cow parsley, thrushes and 'All the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' (Edward Thomas's Adlestrop is not far from Asthall) take me back to our stretch of the Windrush. No health, no safety, no handrail on the single planks that were our bridges as we crossed and recrossed over the river. It was paradise and I knew it. The river water had its own smell that rose from the easily stirred-up mud, and many years later when swimming among the weeds and mud in a pond high above Chatsworth, in the company of moorhens and mallard, nostalgia for the river at Asthall was almost too much and I was six again.

My father loved the river, described in the estate agent's brochure when Asthall was sold as 'of the most attractive character to a fisherman, including rapids, gentle swims and pool', but he was plagued by the idea of the coarse fish that competed with the trout. Like Uncle Matthew, he called on the services of a chubb fuddler who came and scattered magic seed on the water till hundreds of chubb rose to the surface, 'flapping, swooning, fainting, choking, thoroughly and undoubtedly fuddled'. Nancy's account of this annual event is one of the funniest passages in any of her books.

Farve made a pool in the river, even adding a diving board for the brave, where we learned to swim, held up by water-wings and wearing rubber bathing caps that cruelly pulled our hair. His own bathing costume was made of thin, harsh, dark-blue serge bound with braid. For the sake of modesty it had a skirt – 'my crrinoleeene' he called it in an exaggerated French accent. Unexpectedly, Farve and his brothers spoke perfect French, thanks to their tutor

Monsieur Cuvelier, who lived at Batsford and taught them when they were boys. The old tutor came to stay at Asthall during the holidays and his presence always put Farve in the sunniest of moods; according to Diana, 'He and our uncles became boys again before our astonished eyes.' Walking back to the house after bathing, Farve used to pick up sticks and stones with his toes to amuse us. 'Look what my prehensile extremities can do,' he said, but however hard we tried our toes could not be as clever or useful.

In the name of culture, my sisters started the Outing Club. Farve's brother, Uncle Tommy, drove the older children in his car, an envied open-tourer that had a roof like the hood of a pram – with as many finger-pinching hinges – and windows of yellowing celluloid that cracked easily and were striped with sticking plaster. Unity, Decca and I went in Farve's car. I was the Club Bore as we had to keep stopping for me to get out and be sick; all I remember of these outings is the grass by the roadside. We visited Kenilworth Castle and Stratford-upon-Avon in pursuit of history and literature. Another uncle, my mother's brother George Bowles, accompanied us in the role of visiting professor and told us about the past glories of which Farve and Uncle Tommy were blissfully ignorant. I was too young to go on the outing to Stratford that passed into family lore, when Farve, pressed by Muv, took the older children to see *Romeo and Juliet*. Uncle Matthew's reaction in *The Pursuit of Love* is unmistakably that of Farve: 'He cried copiously and went into a furious rage because it ended badly. "All the fault of that damned padre," he kept saying on the way home, still wiping his eyes. "That blasted fella, what's 'is name, Romeo, might have known a blasted papist would mess up the whole thing. Silly old fool of a nurse too, I bet she was an R.C., dismal old bitch." '

When I was four, my parents, Decca and I drove to Scotland in stages to stay with a friend of my father. An obvious stopping place on the way was Redesdale Cottage in Northumberland where Farve's mother lived. Grandmother Redesdale was fat, pink-cheeked and smiling, with wispy white hair tucked into a small black cap. She was always dressed in black, unlike widows of today, and was a wonderful storyteller. She kept a Berkshire pig instead of

a dog, the double of Beatrix Potter's Pig-Wig, which she took to church on a lead. No one thought it a bit odd – affection for animals was taken for granted – and she had a similar affection for my father whom she called 'Poor Dowdie', with an indulgent smile.

Christmas parties at Asthall were homemade and on Christmas Night we wore fancy dress – nothing grand, we picked up whatever was to hand. My father's only concession was to put on a red wig, but he never appears in the photographs as he was always behind the camera. Pam dressed as Lady Rowena from *Ivanhoe* and wore the same outfit every year: a long, floppy, low-necked gown, embellished with a row of orange-red beads. The beads are on my dressing table now and remind me of her every time I see them. Nancy was a dab hand at disguise and her costume was always the best. She loved making a bit of trouble and went missing one year when the family photograph was about to be taken. We shouted and looked for her everywhere. Eventually there was a knock at the back door and a filthy, cold, wet tramp appeared. It was Nancy. When Asthall was for sale, it was the sister of Mrs Hardcastle, wife of the prospective buyer, who became Nancy's inspiration. Mrs Hardcastle's sister was no beauty: she had a thick black moustache and wore a cloche hat and mothy fur slung around her neck. Nancy used to appear quite often in this dreary disguise and once took in Mabel, who showed her into the drawing room.

My mother gave a Christmas tea party every year for the village schoolchildren between the ages of five and fourteen. Lists of names and ages were kept from one year to the next and each child was given a toy and a garment by Father Christmas, who was played by the vicar. He arrived to an atmosphere of tremendous excitement: the big drawing room was darkened except for a few candles, handbells were rung and in he came through the window carrying his sack on his back. 'I come from the land of ice and snow,' he intoned in a deep voice to the dumbstruck children. The magic never failed. After an enormous tea, the children trooped out clutching their parcels and an orange, a treat in itself in those days.

My father did not wish for a social life. Muv would have enjoyed one but seldom suggested anything he would not want – she was

aware of the hazards. Lunch guests were rare, but a memorable exception was the Duchess of Marlborough, the American Gladys Marie Deacon, second wife of the Ninth Duke, who came over from Blenheim. She produced a paper handkerchief, the first any of us had seen, blew her nose and stuck it into a yew hedge. My father was outraged. At lunch she asked him if he had read Elinor Glyn's *Three Weeks* (everyone was talking about the writer and her work at the time). Farve glared at her. 'I haven't read a book for *three years*,' he barked. That was the end of that subject and of the Duchess of Marlborough. Years later, when Nancy invited some undergraduate friends from Oxford to lunch, my father waited for a pause in the conversation and said loudly to my mother at the other end of the table, 'Have these people no homes of their own?'

But Muv was amused by Nancy's friends. She once asked Henry Weymouth (later the Marquess of Bath, who opened a safari park at his Wiltshire family seat, Longleat) what his favourite way of spending the day was. 'Ratting,' he replied with conviction. There were even a few weekend parties where strangers were well diluted with aunts, uncles and cousins – relations were always first on the list. When Nancy was eighteen, Farve conceded that a dance must be given for her. Muv was unable to gather enough young men for the event and, according to Nancy, my father trawled the House of Lords and netted a few middle-aged fellows; they must have been surprised to be invited to a debutante dance. As the day drew near, Farve asked my mother what time the 'on-rushing *convives*' were expected. The poor fellow had to endure a repeat of this torture five more times as each daughter grew up.

My parents seldom had friends to stay. One exception was Violet Hammersley, who came on prolonged visits. 'Mrs Ham' was a near contemporary of Muv but seemed much older. She was born and had spent the first years of her life in Paris, where her father, Mr Freeman-Williams, was a diplomat. When he died, Mrs Freeman-Williams took her young family to live in London, where Muv remembered her as a friend of her own father. Mrs Ham was an unexpected friend of my mother: her circle was intellectual and artistic – from Somerset Maugham to Bloomsbury and beyond –

while Muv was taken up with children and domestic affairs. According to Nancy she looked like El Greco's mistress and, with her dark hair and sallow complexion, would certainly have made an ideal model for the painter. She always wore black and was draped in shawls from head to foot. We called her 'the Widow' or 'Wid', not to her face, but when it occasionally slipped out she put on the expression of resignation usually reserved for Nancy's teases.

By the time I knew her her late husband's bank, Cox & Co., had failed and Mrs Ham's means were much reduced. Gone was the house on the river at Bourne End and with it the Venetian gondola and gondolier. She had retired to a small Regency house in Totland Bay on the Isle of Wight, where her garden shed, known as 'The Mansion', had been converted into two guest bedrooms. It was dreadfully damp but because it was Mrs Ham's we loved it. We never tired of asking her how she had lost her money. Her face would take on a tragic look and, with exaggerated pronunciation of every syllable, she said, 'and th*i*en the b*i*ank f*i*ailed', which was met with howls of laughter from us all. She was a strict pessimist: according to her the past was black, the future blacker. It was a triumph when my sisters persuaded her to dance her version of the cancan to the tune of 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-di-ay'. She lifted her layers of skirt, pointed her toe and was off. But just the once.

Mrs Ham was famously mean. One day, when told that some friends were coming to call on her, she asked me in a sepulchral voice, 'Does that involve sherry?' When she came to lunch with us in London, my father would stand waiting on the steps with half a crown in his hand to pay the taxi; he knew she would fumble in her purse and say she had no change. Her arrival in our house was marked by the strong antiseptic smell of TCP that filled the bathroom and the passage. Farve teased Mrs Ham mercilessly. She thrived on the attention but was never quite sure when he was joking – that was his way with many people and the pair of them were a regular turn.

In spite of the difference in generations, Mrs Ham became an intimate friend of my sisters and mine because of her deep interest in our doings. My mother kept a distance from our passions; she

looked on them with amusement but did not get involved. Mrs Ham, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by whatever we told her, however exaggerated and dotty – chiefly about love and romance, of course – and we confided in her as in an agony aunt. To sit on the sofa next to her, her face close to mine, to have her listening with intense concentration to me and me alone, was something I had never experienced and found irresistible. It was thrilling when she said, '*Child*, are you in love?' Naturally we always were and told her about it in lengthy detail. The idea of any grown-up being in the least bit interested amazed us; no wonder she was a welcome guest. I wrote hundreds of letters to her, as did we all, and we got lovely ones back, usually beginning, 'Horror Child', and admonishing us for not writing more frequently.

Many years after we left Asthall, I went back to see the house and found to my joy the old telephone, thin as a parasol handle, still on its cradle, the same plate rack above the sink in the pantry and the same lino still on the nursery floor. The feel of it underfoot and all that went with that room made me long for Nanny Blor, for the comfort of her lap, her hymn-singing and prayers at bedtime. Nanny's real name was Laura Dicks. Her father was a blacksmith and she came from Egham in Surrey. How she got the nicknames 'Blor' or 'm'Hinket' I do not remember. In 1910, when my mother interviewed her, she was thirty-nine and not robust, and it seemed doubtful whether she could push the pram up the hill from Victoria Road to the park, laden with heavy toddlers in the shape of Pam, aged three, Tom, nearly two, and four-month-old Diana. My parents havered and then Nanny saw Diana. 'Oh, what a lovely baby!' and that was it. She arrived to stay for more than forty years.

Like my mother, Nanny was always there, unchanging, steady, dependable – the ideal background for a child – and, like my mother, she was always scrupulously fair. If Nanny did have a favourite it was Decca, an irresistibly attractive child, curly-haired, affectionate and funny. But I was unaware of this and loved her with all my heart, as we all did. She was the antidote to Nancy and a very present help in

time of trouble, 'the still small voice of calm'. She was neither tall nor short and you would not have picked her out in a crowd. Her clothes were those of her profession: grey coat and skirt, black hat and shoes and, in the summer, a quiet cotton dress with a white collar. On car drives, when I always felt sick, I used to cling to her gloved hand. The gloves were made of something called 'fabric', which must have covered a lot of possibilities. I never saw her lose her temper or even be really cross though she muttered at us sometimes. She must have been more sorely tried than any other Nanny, but we were always forgiven and treated to a bedtime hymn. Her favourites were 'The Ninety and Nine' ('There were ninety and nine that safely lay/In the shelter of the fold,' Nanny sang, 'But one away on the hills had strayed/Far off from the gates of gold'), 'Shall We Gather at the River?', 'Loving Shepherd of Thy Sheep' and 'Now the Day is Over'. She was deeply religious and must have suffered from not being able to attend her own Congregational church when we were at Asthall, or later Swinbrook, but she never said so.

She did not criticize us much, neither did she praise. 'No, darling, I shouldn't do that if I were you,' or 'Very nice, darling,' was as far as it went, her eyes on her needle or the iron, the regular tools of the nursery. Signs of arrogance, conceit or vanity she called 'parading about' and discouraged them with a little sniff and cough. 'It's all right, darling, no one's going to look at you,' became her standard saying when we complained that our dresses were not smart enough for a party. She carried this dictum a bit far when Diana, eighteen years old and staggeringly beautiful in her wedding dress, said, 'Oh Nanny, this hook and eye doesn't work. It looks awful.' 'It's all right, darling,' Nanny soothed, 'who's going to look at you?'

I read now about the necessity of self-esteem in children. We would have become impossibly pleased with ourselves had we been indulged with such a thing. As it was, our ups and downs were high and low enough, and Nanny sat on any ups. Her own childhood had been strict no doubt, but she never imposed her parents' rules on us. She accepted our governesses and their different ways without a murmur, as she did my mother's unusual, not

to say eccentric, rules about food and medicine. When the time came for us to leave the nursery for the schoolroom, she never questioned the authority of the governesses, though I am sure she must have suffered at losing the little ones and sometimes suspected, rightly, that the governesses were not all they should be. As soon as we could after lessons, we rushed back to talk to her. She was the one we loved.

We seldom went shopping or had new clothes. When I was eight, Diana married and her sister-in-law, Grania Guinness, was the same age as me but taller. She had the most wonderful dresses from Wendy, the ultimate in children's clothes for style and beauty, and when a parcel arrived with a dress she had outgrown, my excitement was intense. Otherwise, Fair Isle jerseys and a 'smart' coat for church were about it. Skating was an exception and I was allowed one of those lovely short full skirts that make whatever you do on the ice look better.

Our underclothes were woollen vests and knickers and an extraordinary, but apparently necessary, concoction called a liberty bodice, which had no freedom about it so how it got its name I cannot imagine. It was tight and made of some harsh stuff, with here and there straps and buttons that did nothing. The nursery fireguard with an extra brass rail was Nanny's drying place; it answered perfectly and the faint smell of damp wool was part of childhood. Nanny did her best to make us self-reliant and tidy and to instil in us the other qualities she thought necessary. It was an uphill task. When I threw my underclothes into a heap on the floor, she said, 'Put them the right way, they're all inside out.' 'Well, m'Hinket,' I replied, 'tomorrow they won't be inside out.' 'Now, darling,' she said, 'what if you had an accident and were taken to hospital? Think what a shock the nurses would have if they saw your vest inside out.' Even when very young I thought nurses might have seen worse things, but I have not forgotten what she said.

One of the rare holidays we had as young children was going with Nanny to stay with her twin sister, whose husband kept a hardware shop in the main street of Hastings. They lived above the

shop and we lodged with them. The smell of paraffin and polish, the brushes, brooms and besoms that hung from the ceiling, the freezing-cold grey sea with a ginger biscuit reward for going in – all were lovely in their way but as we could not take our ponies, goats, rats, mice, guinea pigs and dogs it seemed a waste of a fortnight to me. Nanny's own holiday was the worst moment of the year. Diana told me that, aged three, I refused to eat, in spite of our Churchill cousins' nanny coming to take Blor's place for those fourteen ghastly days. It was Diana herself who persuaded me to swallow the shovelled-in food.

We never considered Blor's own life. Like Mabel and Annie, the head housemaid, she was so much part of the family that she was not consulted about moves or anything else that might affect her. She just came with us. Long after her role in the nursery was over, she remained a vital part of the household, washing, ironing, sewing and darning; just her being there meant the world to me and my sisters. She accompanied Decca and me on our rare shopping trips to Oxford. We stopped for tea at the Cadena Café or, if we were feeling rich, at Fuller's which meant walnut cake with a perfect icing, the acme of a good tea.

Being the youngest of a family had its advantages. Rules were stretched a bit and I was my father's favourite – whether that was because I was the last or because I shared his interests I do not know. The disadvantage was being an object of The Others' derision, 'So *stupid*, you can't keep up, you're such a BORE.' They made a circle round me, pointing and chanting, 'Who's the least important person in this room? YOU.' But this was outweighed by the fun of being with the older ones, even though I could not keep up. We fought, of course, as well as baited and teased each other, but after tears came the laughter and I look back on my childhood as a happy time. I thought our upbringing was exactly like everyone else's. Perhaps it was not.