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Love in a Cold Climate

Written by Nancy Mitford

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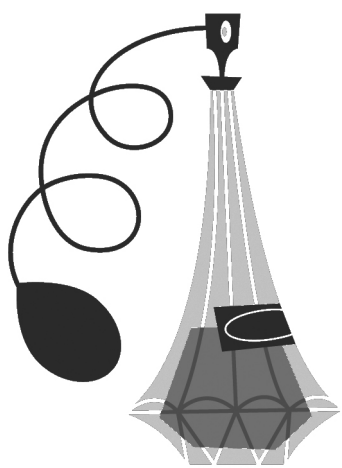
Love in a Cold Climate

NANCY MITFORD



Introduction by Alan Cumming

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PART ONE

I

I am obliged to begin this story with a brief account of the Hampton family, because it is necessary to emphasize the fact once and for all that the Hamptons were very grand as well as very rich. A glance at Burke or at 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, any 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 30s. the three.) *Georgiana Lady Montdore and Her Circle, The Magnificent Montdores* 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 terrible 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 medieval 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 Burke and Debrett linger with obvious enjoyment over so genuine an object as this family, unspoilt 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, until, in 1770, the Lord Hampton of the day brought back, from a visit to Versailles, a French bride, a Mademoiselle de Montdore. Their 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. A great and life-long friendship with the Regent 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 Hôtel 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 château. This he assembled round a splendid tower of his own designing, covered the walls of the rooms with French panelling and silks, 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 ever 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 for ever 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 and 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 old and 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 wonderful old 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 horde 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.'

People liked to pretend 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, 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, 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 it 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 Montdores at all. It is possible that, as Lady Montdore was under forty when Polly was born, they did not at first envisage her as an only child and that 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 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 as 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 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, it is 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 ambitions; 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 Abbey, an altar, an Archbishop, a voice saying, 'I, Albert Edward Christian George Andrew Patrick David take thee, Leopoldina'? It was not an impossible dream. On the other hand nothing could be more purely English, 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, each seemed destined to become the other's greatest friend. 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 (that 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 sing-song Radlett voice, 'Did you ever have worms, Polly? I did, you can't imagine how fidgety 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 holidays, packed off there on my way to or from Alconleigh as 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.