Diana Mosley

Anne de Courcy

Chapter 1

Exceptional beauty is an attribute which defines its possessor's life. When Diana Mitford was only ten, her sixteen-year-old cousin Michael Bowles fell violently in love with her. Her looks, charm and gaiety, enhanced by the setting of a close and vivid family life, had an irresistible appeal to this rather lonely boy. From Marlborough – then one of the most rigorous and least enjoyable of public schools – he wrote daily screeds of devotion, often concluding wistfully, 'I suppose we must wait six years and then you will be old enough to marry.' Although this devotion was entirely proper – Diana was far more interested in the family ponies, dogs and chickens – he was uneasily conscious that it might be misinterpreted, so persuaded Mabel, head parlourmaid and friend of all the Mitford children, to give his letters to Diana privately instead of leaving them on the hall table with the others.

Discovery was inevitable. Lord Redesdale reacted as if his ten-year-old child had planned to elope, rushing straight to Marlborough and storming unannounced into the study Bowles shared with his friend Mitchell.

'Is this Michael Bowles's room?' he shouted furiously. 'My name is Redesdale and I want to talk to him.' His rage was so terrifying that Mitchell, alarmed, set off to find his friend.

'Somebody called Redesdale has come to see you,' he said. 'You've got to hide for a couple of hours, until he goes away. Otherwise I think he'll kill you.'

Eventually, after stumping up and down muttering for some time, the angry father departed. Although Lord Redesdale forgot fairly quickly, Michael Bowles was so terrified by the incident that he lost touch with his cousins for almost forty years.

The episode illustrates not only Lord Redesdale's almost oriental paranoia about the chastity of his daughters but the effects of a personality so powerful that it was stamped on his children indelibly.

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The second son and third of the second Lord Redesdale's nine children, David Freeman-Mitford had impressively good looks, with blue eyes under light, brown-blond hair and a smooth skin tanned by a life spent as far as he could manage it out of doors. He was a man of strong and irrational prejudices. He loathed Roman Catholics, Jews and foreigners – especially Germans – and took the occasional instant dislike to some harmless individual. His special fury was reserved for men whom he suspected of wishing to woo his daughters.

His charm, when he exerted it, was formidable; he was loving, affectionate, even sentimental, and immensely funny, with an original, oblique and intelligent but uneducated mind. His rages were terrifying, though actual punishment was seldom worse than being sent out of the room or, occasionally, early to bed. What made them so devastating was their unpredictability: dazzling good humour could give way without warning to ferocious temper. Sometimes his children could get away with cheekiness and uproarious wildness, the next moment they would be sent upstairs in tears for the same behaviour that had made him laugh only minutes before.

To the children's friends this emotional quicksand was petrifying – one shy boy was threatened with a horsewhip for putting his feet on a sofa, another referred to as 'that hog Watson' to his face. James Lees-Milne has described an evening when he was sent away from the house at nine-thirty p.m. in a downpour, for attacking an anti-German film about Edith Cavell. Equally true to form, a couple of hours later, drenched and miserable, he was welcomed back affectionately by his host, who appeared to have forgotten all about the incident.

But these extremes merely toughened the Mitford children's psyches. Grouped on a sunlit lawn in muslin frocks and picture hats they may, as one dazzled visitor remarked, have resembled a Winterhalter portrait but under the ribbons they were of the same steely breed. 'Mitfords are a savage tribe,' wrote Goronwy Rees.

David Mitford was the sun around which his daughters revolved. Forever simultaneously seeking his approval and seeing how far they could go, they led an emotional life that was a switchback between hysterical tears ('floods') and gales of laughter ('shrieks'). Their often outrageous behaviour, designed to attract his attention, found echoes in adult life. Jessica spoke of the 'strong streak of delinquency' in her husband Esmond Romilly that struck such a responsive chord in her; Unity found a positive joy in shocking people and in extremes of behaviour; and most of the sisters later conceived passions for men with notably strong personalities

or convictions. As Nancy wrote of Uncle Matthew, the character founded on her father in her novel The Pursuit of Love: 'Much as we feared, much as we disapproved of, passionately as we sometimes hated Uncle Matthew, he still remained for us a sort of criterion of English manhood; there seemed something not quite right about any man who greatly differed from him.'

To Diana, for years of her childhood David's favourite daughter, he handed on his honesty, his funniness, a singleness of purpose so undeviating as to be at times both ruthless and blinkered, the brilliant Mitford blue eyes and an independence of mind that cared nothing for what others might think, say or do. Perhaps significantly, in view of their own later political beliefs, she and Unity described him as 'one of Nature's fascists'.

There was nothing obvious in David Mitford's parentage to produce such an extreme, eccentric personality. His father, 'Bertie' Redesdale, was a well-read, cultivated man, a cousin and contemporary of the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, with the necessary gravity and cleverness to serve with distinction as a diplomat, first in Russia and then as First Secretary at the British Embassy in Tokyo. Here he became fascinated by all things Japanese, learning the language and being one of the first Europeans to be presented to the emperor. He was a great gardener and his influence can still be seen at Sandringham, where he assisted in laying out the gardens – his speciality was bamboo. He was the author of a number of books, from the best-selling Tales of Old Japan (written on his return from the Far East) to his memoirs. David's mother, born Lady Clementine Ogilvy, was a first cousin of Bertrand Russell.

Bertie Redesdale was also intensely musical, admiring especially the German composers and Wagner in particular. He visited Bayreuth frequently, not only for the festival of music and opera but also to see the Wagner family – through his friend, the Wagner expert Houston Stewart Chamberlain (whose works evinced a deep belief in the superiority of the Teutonic race), he had become such an intimate of the Wagners that his photograph was on Siegfried Wagner's writing desk. His passion for Wagner's work, with its mythic themes and stirring martial passages, was a cultural bonding which would prove significant in the empathy later felt by both Diana and her brother Tom for Nazi Germany.

David was born on 13 March 1878. Even as a child his temper was appalling and his behaviour often so bad that his father would not let him follow his older brother Clem to Eton, fearing that his disruptive presence might make life there difficult for Clem. Instead, he was educated at Radley, which he hated. Team spirit, for which Radley was famous, was low on his list of priorities and he detested all academic

work. He could, though, speak excellent French, learned in early days in the schoolroom from a M. Cuvalier, who went on to become a French master at Eton.

His career began with tea planting in Ceylon. When the Boer War broke out in 1899, he enlisted as a private in the Northumberland Fusiliers and was so badly wounded that one lung had to be removed. In February 1904 he married twenty-four-year-old Sydney Gibson Bowles, whom he had first met when she was a child of fourteen. She was tall, reserved and attractive, with light brown hair, beautiful eyes and a manner of speaking – with drawling, idiosyncratic emphases, ejaculations and sudden swoops up or down the scale – that later became known as the Mitford voice.

Sydney's father was one of the cleverest and most amusing men of his age. Thomas Gibson Bowles was the illegitimate son of an early Victorian Cabinet minister, Milner Gibson, by his mistress Susan Bowles. Milner Gibson brought up his 'by-blow' in his own large family, though Thomas was sent to France to be educated.

Thomas went into journalism and, with his perfect French, became the Paris correspondent for the influential Morning Post – during the siege of Paris, he was mistaken for a German spy because of his flaxen hair and blue eyes. When he was twenty-five he founded Vanity Fair which, with its cartoons by Spy of politicians and notables, quickly became the rage. He entered parliament, sitting as the Conservative member for King's Lynn for many years – though he never hesitated to criticise his own party in another of his publications, the Candid Quarterly.

He was an original in every sense and inculcated principles of health in his daughter Sydney from which she never deviated. They were an early form of preventive medicine, resting on the belief that, given the right food and healthy living conditions including fresh air and exercise, the body – the 'Good Body', as Sydney called it – would look after itself. He also advocated showers which, in the days when having a bath was often an adventure in itself, were unheard of. 'The sort of bath we all take is a great mistake,' he once told a schoolfriend of his grandson Tom. 'You wash the dirt off yourself, then you sponge it back on.'

All her life Sydney baked her own bread and the food at her table, though plain, was always first class. Like her father, she followed the Mosaic Law – she had a theory that Orthodox Jews never got cancer. Sydney's children were forbidden shellfish or crustaceans – Diana did not taste lobster until she was married – and allowed meat only from animals that had cloven hooves or chewed the cud. Simple dishes like rabbit pie were therefore unknown. Bacon and sausages were, however, a regular

breakfast dish for David, who refused to take any notice of his wife's dietary quirks; often, after their parents had left the dining room but before breakfast had been cleared away, the children would sneak in and thrust what remained of these forbidden delicacies up the legs of their elasticated knickers to be enjoyed later. Tom used to make his sisters' mouths water by his descriptions of school breakfasts ('sausages AND bacon!').

Thomas Bowles owned another publication, The Lady, which he had founded in order to provide a worthwhile job for his mistress, whom he made its editor. It was to prove a lifeline for his son. When David and Sydney married in 1904, by the standards of their class and kind they were poor: their total income was £600 a year. The Lady provided an allowance for Sydney and a job for David, who was employed there for ten years, although he disliked the work almost as much as he loathed London life. Equally typically, Thomas Bowles lent the bride and groom his yacht, the Hoyden, for their honeymoon.

Thomas's passion was the sea: he was a master mariner, he put his two sons into the navy, and he spent all the time he could on the Hoyden. His family accompanied him on his annual summer cruise, usually to the smart Channel resorts of Deauville and Trouville. Here they met the fashionable portrait painter Helleu, a fellow sailor – his yacht, the Etoile, which was moored at Deauville, became his summer studio. Helleu was later a formative influence in Diana's life.

When Thomas Bowles's wife died at the age of thirty-five, there was even less to keep him tethered to dry land. Taking his four children, he would put to sea for months at a time. This curious, isolated upbringing, remote from the ordinary stimuli of everyday life, coupled with the precision, order and discipline necessary in shipboard life, may have accounted for much in Sydney's character. She ran her houses with efficiency, keeping meticulous accounts. To her children she was detached, undemonstrative – she seldom cuddled or physically petted them – and strict. If she disapproved, she presented a stonily implacable face to the malefactor, though as her brood increased in numbers she became noticeably more mellow. All her daughters except the youngest, Deborah, who consistently adored her, went through long periods of disliking and resenting her, though all, except the eldest, Nancy, came later to love and respect her.

It was from Sydney that Diana inherited her love of beautiful houses and gift for furnishing them exquisitely, together with the ability to run them smoothly and efficiently. For all her vagueness, Sydney's life was extremely well ordered. By eight-thirty every morning, even after a ball to which she had chaperoned one or other of her daughters until three, she was at her writing desk, telephoning orders to be

delivered that day, organising the menu and setting down every penny spent. She was an excellent manager: for years she kept chickens, which paid for her daughters' education. Twice a week, eggs from these 150-odd hens went up to Kettner's restaurant and her husband's club, the Marlborough. They were despatched from the station at Shipton-under-Wychwood in large wooden boxes lined with felt. These boxes, which held six dozen eggs each, were locked by Sydney at the start of their journey and unlocked with duplicate keys by her customers in London.

When David and Sydney were first married they lived in London at 1 Graham Street (now Graham Terrace), a pretty little house Sydney papered in white, with wreaths of green leaves round the cornices. Here were born Sydney's first four children: Nancy on 28 November 1904, Pamela on 27 November 1907, then the longed-for son, Thomas, on 2 January 1909. When Diana was born, at two o'clock on 17 June 1910, her mother's first reaction was to burst into tears at the sight of another girl.

The children's first nanny was the daughter of the captain of their grandfather's yacht; their second, quickly dismissed, became known as Bad Nanny. Then came Laura Dicks, known as Nanny Blor, who was adored by them all and whose influence was immense – she was warm, loving, clever and uncompromisingly fair, providing a much-needed emotional balance.

When small, the children lived an entirely nursery life, emerging from it only in the early evening when, in clean clothes and with hair neatly brushed, they were taken down to the drawing room to see their parents. At six o'clock they were collected and taken upstairs for bath and bed.

All of them, including the servants, managed to cram into 1 Graham Street – on one occasion it also stabled a pony. On his way home from his office at The Lady, David spotted a Shetland which he thought would be an excellent first pony for his young family. He bought it there and then, took it back to the house in a taxi and stabled it on the half-landing amid straw until they could take it down to the Old Mill Cottage, which Sydney had rented near High Wycombe. As he was not allowed to put it in the guard's van – 'It isn't a dog,' the guard remarked irrefutably – he booked a complete third-class compartment, but even then they were such a tight fit that Pam had to travel in the luggage rack.

Sydney's fifth pregnancy made a move to a larger house essential. By the time war broke out on 4 August 1914, the family was installed in 49 Victoria Road, conveniently close to Kensington Gardens for their twice-daily walks. Here, though

still believing themselves poor on £1,000 a year, they had a cook, kitchenmaid, parlourmaid, housemaid, nanny and nurserymaid.

Four days after the outbreak of war, Unity Valkyrie, generally known as Bobo, was born. As a war baby, her second name, after the warrior maidens of the 'Ring', was a tribute to her grandfather Redesdale's passion for Wagner.

David rejoined his regiment, the Northumberland Fusiliers, though because of his Boer War wounds he was not allowed to go to the Front and served instead as a dispatch rider. His army pay was less than he was earning from The Lady, and Sydney's father's response to these hard times was to cut his daughter's allowance. Sydney accordingly let both their houses and took her family to live rent-free at Malcolm House, on the Gloucestershire estate of Batsford, which belonged to the children's grandfather, Lord Redesdale. It was their first experience of real country.

In 1915 David's elder brother Clement was killed. David became his father's heir, succeeding to the title the following year. Bertie Redesdale was buried in a flower-lined grave at Batsford church – his little granddaughters wore cotton dresses in the half-mourning colours of grey and mauve – and two months later David and Sydney moved into Batsford Park; David's mother, now the Dowager Lady Redesdale, went to live at Redesdale in Northumberland, where the family owned more land.

At Batsford David led the life of a country gentleman. Although he did not hunt – he had broken his pelvis in a terrible fall and never got on a horse again – riding was an integral part of his children's lives and he himself bred Shire horses. It was a quiet life, as both Sydney and David actively disliked society, seldom went out and, if possible, saw only their relations and a few friends. One Batsford highlight was the removal of Diana's appendix on a table in one of the visitors' rooms when she was eight; another was the – to her – revelation that men too could read books. Their London neighbours the Normans had come to stay to escape the bombs and Zeppelins of wartime London and one evening she saw Mr Norman sitting in an armchair reading a book, an activity she had hitherto believed was confined to women and children. 'Farve abominated the printed word,' she said later. When Batsford was sold, ten-year-old Tom was left to decide which of the books in its huge, well-stocked library should be kept.

This sale, the first of what his children regarded as their father's many attempts to divest himself of property and furniture, took place in 1919. David could not afford

to keep up Batsford, although he had closed many of the rooms, but it was a bad time to sell and prices were disappointingly low.

His plan was to build a house designed specifically for his own requirements on a wooded hill above the village of Swinbrook in Oxfordshire, where he had inherited land. Meanwhile, with some of the proceeds of the Batsford sale, he had added to the Swinbrook estate by buying a thousand acres adjoining it, land that included most of the small village of Asthall, two miles from Swinbrook, and its big house, Asthall Manor. Here the Mitfords lived for six years.

Asthall, the house most loved by the children and the most closely identified with their childhood, is an exquisite Elizabethan manor of gold-grey Cotswold stone, its steep roofs dappled like tortoiseshell, lying just above the church and a small churchyard full of the casket-shaped tombs of rich wool merchants. It is set in green lawns that fall away, past a huge copper beech and groves of silver birch, to the valley of the River Windrush below. Along the green verge below its high stone outer wall is a row of lilacs planted by Sydney; the three may trees on the tiny village green were planted by David. The road they flank is called Akeman Street: the village was once a Roman settlement. A little way along from the house is a square of old stone farm buildings and stables where the children kept their ponies and horses. Beyond the pretty old cottages, which then housed the Asthall farm workers, stretches rolling empty farmland.

The children were encouraged to 'farm' in miniature, to teach them to look after animals and to earn pocket money. Each was given a smallholding, for which a small rent was paid to their father. Pam, then as later keenly interested in farming, got herself asked to the annual dinner for tenant farmers on the incontrovertible grounds that she too was renting land from David. Here she discovered that she was paying more than the going rate and negotiated a reduction for them all. Diana kept chickens, pigs and sometimes calves.

Sydney furnished Asthall with her favourite French furniture and family portraits, including one of herself painted by de Laszlo at the height of her beauty. In the drawing room were Louis XVI commodes, gilt-bronze clocks, a secretaire and barometer (later bought by Diana when they came up at one of her father's numerous sales) and white chairs covered with antique needlework. The long hall with its old oak linenfold panelling had a fireplace at each end and deep windows on either side of the door. To the right of this door, which faced the church, was David's ground-floor business room, with his dressing room above and, on the third floor, the bedroom later inhabited by Pam.

As luck would have it, Pam and her father were the two family members most sensitive to the supernatural, and this, the north end of the house, appeared to be haunted. Both were disturbed by voices, inexplicable noises and a general atmosphere of terror, though neither spoke of these phenomena to each other until many years later – David because he did not wish to alarm his family and Pam because few children confided in their parents then, least of all the Mitfords. In any case none of David's children saw much of their parents; Jessica (always known as Decca, and born on 11 September 1917) used to have bets with herself as to whether she could go a whole day without seeing either of them.

Pam first experienced these manifestations when, wanting a bedroom to herself, she was moved up to the top floor. Night after night, she felt that some malevolent entity was watching her. Going to the bathroom meant passing through an empty attic used only for storing luggage. At first she thought the voices she heard talking nearby were the servants, whose bedrooms were also on the third floor; soon she discovered they were not. Her father's experiences were more specific. In addition to the voices and the inexplicable noises which he and Pam heard when sitting alone in the hall and which he dismissed as 'rats' or 'water in the pipes' – although nobody ever saw a rat and the pipes were all on the other side of the house and a floor higher – he regularly saw a female ghost. As time passed, she showed herself to him with increasing frequency. The bedrooms on the first floor, most of which were on the side of the house nearest the road, were fortunately unaffected.

Soon after the family moved to Asthall, Sydney went up to London to have her seventh and last child, a daughter (more tears), born on 31 March 1920, christened Deborah but always known as Debo.

As the children grew, shifting alliances and ambivalent feelings characterised their relationships with each other. Tom, the only son, occupied a special position, adored and spoilt by both parents, worshipped and envied by his sisters – treatment which had no effect upon his happy, self-possessed, confident nature. Diana, closest to him in age, regarded him almost as her twin and for many years he was the most important person in her life. They had the same interests, mainly literature and music – Tom was the most musical member of the family. At Eton, where he was allowed a piano in his room, he played the flute in the school orchestra and won the Music Prize in 1926. Inspired by the teaching of the Precentor of Eton, the organist Dr Ley, he thought for a time of becoming a professional musician.

Much of the sisters' childhood was spent in fear of Nancy. Pam and Diana were her particular targets, as displacers of the love that had been exclusively hers until Pam was born. The jealousy that would manifest itself throughout her life was expressed in the nursery through peculiarly vicious teasing, her unerring eye and sharp wit mercilessly probing the weak spot of her victim. The only defence against it was laughter. Nothing was sacred, any outward display of feelings was to be mocked, everything must be turned into a joke, a tease ('We shrieked!'), a refusal to take anything seriously which persisted through future years. Tom, away at school much of the time, suffered far less than the others. Nancy was particularly cruel to Pam, the new baby who had drawn away the attention of her parents and, even more importantly, of Nanny. Pam was also the most easily victimised because of an early attack of polio which slowed down her development (from which she later recovered fully). For years Nancy made Pam's childhood a terrifying burden, but her whimperings and misery only provoked her tormentor to worse attacks.

Diana got away more lightly. As a small child she was spoilt by Sydney who, greatly influenced by physical beauty – the housemaids were hired largely for their looks – invariably favoured the child or children going through a pretty phase. On Diana's birthday, Sydney would crown her lovely little daughter with a wreath of the Mrs Simpkins pinks that grew under the rosebushes. During the holidays, when the children had more free time, Tom was there as protector and advocate, yet all through Diana's childhood she feared Nancy for her imaginative unpleasantnesses.

The younger ones, Unity, Jessica and Debo, respectively ten, thirteen and fourteen years younger than Nancy, were more or less immune: by the time they were old enough for serious mockery, Nancy was out in the world and her heart was no longer in teasing. Instead, they attached themselves like small pageboys to particular older sisters. Debo followed Nancy about like a puppy, never happier than when sent on some errand; Diana was worshipped by Jessica (whom she played with, taught to ride, and encouraged to learn French and speak up in front of older people) with a deep devotion that was to turn into a correspondingly icy enmity.

Being a member of a large family meant in many ways an enclosed, cabalistic existence. The sisters saw few people outside the family, and those were chiefly relations and a few chosen friends. There were tribal games – visitors would suddenly see half a dozen blonde children processing in a circle among the Asthall trees holding the family cat in front of them as they chanted, 'The Queen is coming, the Queen is coming!' – family jokes and family teases, most with the obligatory touch of cruelty. 'Who would you rather throw off a tower, Muv or Bobo?'

For Diana and Tom, Asthall's most important feature was a large barn close to the house which had been turned into a library. Neither Sydney nor David visited it – that their parents were lowbrows was one of their children's chief complaints. Here Tom and Diana would retreat for hours, to read, or for Tom to play the piano and Diana to listen, or for Tom to impart to her some of the more interesting things he had learned at Eton, encouraging her to read seriously. When Tom's friends came to stay, he would immediately ask them, 'Would you like to hear me play?' and off they would go to the library, followed by Diana. Inevitably, many of them fell for Tom's beautiful sister.

One of these boys was James Lees-Milne. A friend of Tom's since their private-school days at Lockers Park, he had first come to the house as a ten-year-old. Jim, whose own parents believed that any child found reading was wasting time better spent out of doors, was fascinated by the clever, original Mitford children and the freedom to read and talk afforded by the Asthall library. He taught Diana to read Byron, Shelley, Keats and Coleridge, and fell so deeply in love with her that for the rest of his life no other woman ever evoked in him the same depth of feeling. To him, in the flush of adolescent awakening to beauty of all kinds, she seemed a goddess figure from an earlier world, her blue, caressing eyes, peach skin and long golden hair like those of a Botticelli Venus, her cleverness and beguiling, sympathetic manner hopelessly ensnaring. Diana, he realised even then, was not for him, though they were to become lifelong friends. 'May I treat you as a very cherished sister to whom I can say everything?' he wrote on his return home. 'You don't realise how essential they are to boys. Why are you so amazingly sympathique as well as charming? Very best love . . .'

Another admirer was Winston Churchill's son Randolph, whom Diana had known since he first came to stay at Asthall when he was twelve. He was her second cousin: her grandmother Redesdale and Randolph's grandmother Lady Blanche Hozier, Clementine Churchill's mother, were sisters. Of the five Churchill and seven Mitford children, the cousins closest in age were Diana and Tom Mitford and Randolph and Diana Churchill – the two Dianas were the same age. As they grew older, the four cousins spent more and more time together. Randolph and Diana Churchill came to stay at Asthall; Tom and Diana Mitford were constantly asked to Chartwell. Tom and Randolph became each other's closest friends, while Randolph, precocious, brilliant, surging with an irrepressible vitality and confidence that often expressed itself in appalling behaviour, became ever more besotted with his beautiful cousin. Diana Churchill, red-haired, garrulous from nervousness and eagerness to please, hovered disconsolately on the edge of this tripartite intimacy – often, cruelly, they would run away and hide from her.

Tom and Diana loved these visits to Chartwell. One of the charms of staying with the Churchills was that the rule that children should be seen and not heard did not

apply. Randolph was encouraged by his father to take part in intelligent conversation; Tom and Diana were treated as thinking beings. Sometimes Cousin Winston would sing 'Soldiers of the Queen' at the end of dinner, before going off to play a game of six-pack Bezique followed by hours of work on a book; sometimes there would be discussions which lasted for hours. Here Diana first realised the fascination of politics. Here, as a sixteen-year-old, she heard discussion after discussion about the General Strike and the long-drawn-out stand by the miners which followed; it became, in consequence, the first major political event to impinge on her consciousness. Her sympathies were all with the miners.

Here, too, Diana met Eddie Marsh, the first person to treat her on absolutely equal terms. He was quickly followed by one of Cousin Winston's favourite and most frequent guests. Professor Lindemann (the Prof) was the first person Diana had heard abusing someone for being a Jew – his target was Brian Howard, of whom it was his chief complaint. The Prof was dazzlingly erudite and always prepared to answer questions without any condescension. As Diana grew older he became extremely taken with this clever and beautiful girl. He wrote to her often and she was allowed to go to luncheon with him – suitably chaperoned by Tom – in his rooms at Christ Church, where the excellence of the food, drink and conversation contrasted with the ugly furniture and unpleasing reproductions on the walls. He gave her a watch made of three different golds. None of this did her hypersensitive parents mind, although his innocuous suggestion that she learn German, as Tom was already doing, in order to read Schopenhauer was forbidden – the idea of an 'over-educated' female was anathema to David.

Talking to brilliant older men, listening to Tom's friends, reading what was recommended to her, formed the major part of Diana's education. As in many upper-class families, the Mitford daughters were educated at home – David violently disapproved of school for girls. They had, however, a more solid grounding than many. Of the fifteen governesses, including French teachers who came during the holidays, the longest-serving and the sisters' favourite was Miss Hussey, a superb teacher. From her, through the well-regarded PNEU system with its twice-yearly examinations marked at the PNEU College in Ambleside, they learned subjects such as ancient history and geology, as well as basics like English and history.

Nevertheless, not being sent to school was a recurrent grievance with Nancy, Unity and Jessica. They furiously resented what they saw as their parents' deliberate failure to give them a proper education, although Nancy was allowed to go briefly to Hatherop Castle, where a dozen girls did lessons together. Diana, who hated the idea of dormitories, compulsory games, school food, uniforms, lack of privacy and saying goodbye to her pony, guinea pigs and dog, dreaded the possibility of going away. Nancy, of course, played on this fear. 'Farve and Muv say you're not wanted here,' she would begin. 'They were saying last night that you might not be so stupid and

babyish if you went to school.' Later, eyes gleaming, she would shoot triumphant glances at Diana, silent and miserable across the dining-room table.

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