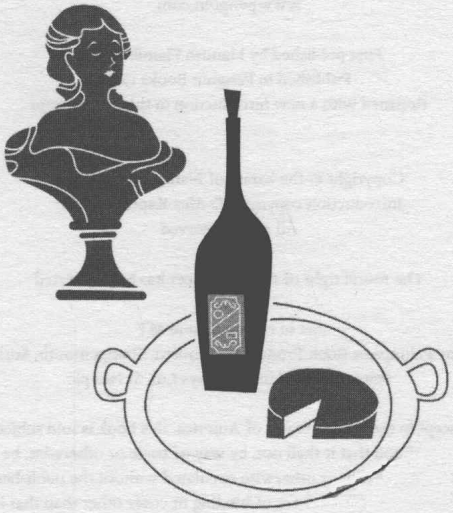
NANCY MITFORD

The Blessing

The Blessing

NANCY MITFORD



Introduction by Alex Kapranos

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Hamish Hamilton 1951
Published in Penguin Books 1957
Reissued with a new introduction in this edition 2010
1

Set in 11/13 pt Dante MT
Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ISBN: 978–0–141–04402–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Introduction

Adulterous aristocrats, social snobbery, petty national prejudice and an insidious infant Machiavelli, all wickedly sent up against a background of easy moral ambiguity – this book was my introduction to the witty, wonderful Nancy Mitford.

When I told my friend Juliet, who loves Mitford, that I had enjoyed *The Blessing*, she was surprised, saying she wouldn't have thought of me as a Mitford fan. In a way, she's right. I'm an accidental fan who didn't hunt her out, but stumbled across her. If I'd known this was a gossipy tale of a bunch of poshos and their petty infidelities I probably wouldn't have picked it up, but a friend was reading an old sixties copy that had belonged to her mother. She kept putting it down every few pages to say 'You're never going to guess what's happened now!' That makes you kind of curious. So I did pick it up. It is one of those books, like a great soap opera, where the characters are so rich and absurd you want to gossip about them with someone else who is just as thrilled and aghast by their behaviour as you are. It's not dumb, though. There is a sharp sense of social insight and tantalizing glimpses of the emerging new world of post-war Europe. Most of all it's funny. There are several incredible one-liners, particularly from the curmudgeonly Franco-phobic Nanny: *one French name is very much like another, I dare say . . . Never mind, dear, nobody's going to look at you* (to the young bride at her wedding) . . . *We've had nothing to eat. Course upon course of nasty greasy stuff smelling of garlic . . . I wasn't going to touch it, let alone give it to Sigi*; and from the sanguine free-loving Charles-Edouard.

I've told you about Georgie in the Park? His mummy and daddy are divorced and he says it's an awfully good idea – you have a much better time all round, he says, when they are. Seven-year-old Sigismond is

'The Blessing' and a wee monster – a master-strategist, playing his parents off each other for his own gain. His mother, Grace, is beautiful, slightly dim and completely besotted with her husband, Charles-Edouard. He's sophisticated and very French. She's very English and 'mentally lazy'. The theme of the book is pretty much that: the English are different from the French, so let's see what happens when we mix them up. There must be a certain amount of observation of her own surroundings in this, as Mitford was living in Paris at the time.

Grace has the air of a young Lady Di: pretty, but gauche – the wilting English Rose, dropping her petals as she's cast into an urbane world of complex etiquette, social deception and competitive adultery that she doesn't really understand. But it's not a tragedy, it's a farce and it's a fantastic farce. There are a couple of book-dropping scenes: the scrabbling for the Blessing's blessing among his father's mistresses (*Look, look, Madame Novembre,* cent á l'heure), the juvenile corruption and baby swap of the 'bring a child' ball, but most spectacular is the grand reveal at the climax of the guided tour of the Ferté house – unlocking the door of Madame de Hauteserre's bedroom with the exotic ceiling . . . Here I am, I don't know you, yet I want to gossip with you about these people and what they get up to.

Mitford is a perfect guide, taking you on a tour of France in 1951. Rationing has been lifted and Dior is draping yards of fabric over the fashionable elite. Old feuds, temporarily suspended during wartime, are revived: Mignon, the Radical Socialist village chemist and Freemason, gives Catholic aristocrat Charles-Edouard a hero's welcome in a moving speech on his return, but weeks later refuses to let his son play with Sigi because he is the offspring of a Catholic aristo. Collaborators are awkwardly assimilated – Charles-Edouard dismisses his lawyer, but, typically, not for moral reasons but the *two hours of self-justification before one can get down to any business. There's no bore like a collabo in all the wide world.* Then there is the new, uninvited, but loud, presence in Paris of the USA, personified by Hector Dexter, the pompous know-all diplomat, lecturing about

teen culture, the virtues of American capitalism (a bottle of Coca-Cola on every table) and, generally, 'the problem with the French'. Charles-Edouard, the very French thrill-seeking adventurer, 'sometimes bored by people, but never by life', makes it clear that he finds Dexter and his contemporary American attitudes boring. Dexter is too self-absorbed to notice. He is the greatest creation in the book, but so unbearable you are as thankful as any of the Parisian characters to be out of his company as soon as possible.

The moral ambiguity and wit suggest Mitford was a fan of Oscar Wilde (the Allingham family pile is called Bunbury) and it is not surprising that the dedication is to her friend Evelyn Waugh. There are a couple of moments where contemporary prejudices make you wince, such as when she describes the Royal Box at a theatre being full of 'darkies', but, compared to the political stance of a couple of her sisters in particular, Nancy is surprisingly liberal. At a dinner party, when the dreary Dexter lectures on the 'morbose' contamination of homosexuality (a manifestation of Bolshevism) rife in British politics, she is setting him up to be cut down by the common sense of the other guests: *they're not sick . . . they just happen to like boys better than girls.*

While Mitford charts the trivial snobberies of her characters with a loving attention to detail, it is with a twinkling irreverence – free from malice, but revelling in their absurdity. She loves the English despite their frumpiness and the French despite, or possibly because of, their fluid morals. Even the manipulative child is charming. It's a treat to share in Nancy's world for a couple of hundred pages.

Alex Kapranos

PENGUIN BOOKS

The Blessing

Nancy Mitford (1904–73) was born in London, the eldest child of the second Baron Redesdale. Her childhood in a large, remote country house with her five sisters and one brother is recounted in the early chapters of *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), which, according to the author, is largely autobiographical. Apart from being taught to ride and speak French, Nancy Mitford always claimed she never received a proper education. She started writing before her marriage in 1932 in order 'to relieve the boredom of the intervals between the recreations established by the social conventions of her world' and had written four novels, including *Wigs on the Green* (1935), before the success of *The Pursuit of Love* in 1945. After the war she moved to Paris where she lived for the rest of her life. She followed *The Pursuit of Love* with *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), *The Blessing* (1951) and *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960). She also wrote four works of biography: *Madame de Pompadour*, first published to great acclaim in 1954, *Voltaire in Love*, *The Sun King* and *Frederick the Great*. As well as being a novelist and a biographer she also translated Madame de Lafayette's classic novel *La Princesse de Clèves* into English, and edited *Noblesse Oblige*, a collection of essays concerned with the behaviour of the English aristocracy and the idea of 'U'and 'non-U'. Nancy Mitford was awarded the CBE in 1972.

Alex Kapranos is a singer and guitarist with the band Franz Ferdinand. His first book, *Sound Bites*, was published by Penguin in 2006.

Part I

I

'The foreign gentleman seems to be in a terrible hurry, dear.'

And indeed the house, though quite large, what used to be called a family house, in Queen Anne's Gate, was filled with sounds of impatience. Somebody was stamping about, moving furniture, throwing windows up and down, and clearing his throat exaggeratedly.

'Ahem! Ahem!'

'How long has he been here, Nanny?'

'Nearly an hour I should think. He played the piano, very fast and loud, for a while, which seemed to keep him quiet. He's only started this shindy since John went and told him you were in and would be down presently.'

'You go, darling, and tell him he must wait while I change out of these trousers,' said Grace, who was vigorously cleaning her neck with cotton wool. 'Oh, the dirt. What I need is a bath.'

The drawing-room door was now flung open.

'Do I see you or not?' The voice was certainly foreign.

'All right – very well. I'll come down now, this minute.'

She looked at Nanny, laughing, and said, 'He might go through the floor, like Rumpelstiltskin.'

But Nanny said, 'Put on a dress dear, you can't go down like that.'

'Shall I come upstairs?' said the voice.

'No, don't, here I am,' and Grace ran down, still in her A.R.P. trousers.

The Frenchman, tall, dark and elegant, in French Air Force uniform, was on the drawing-room landing, both hands on the banister rail. He seemed about to uproot the delicate woodwork. When he saw Grace he said 'Ah!' as though her appearance caused

him gratified surprise, then, 'Is this a uniform? It's not bad. Did you receive my note?'

'Only now,' said Grace. 'I've been at the A.R.P. all day.'

They went into the drawing-room. 'Your writing is very difficult. I was still puzzling over it when I heard all that noise – it was like the French Revolution. You must be a very impatient man.'

'No. But I don't like to be kept waiting, though this room has more compensations than most, I confess.'

'I wouldn't have kept you waiting if I'd known a little sooner – why didn't you . . .'

He was no longer listening, he had turned to the pictures on the walls.

'I do love this Olivier,' he said. 'You must give it to me.'

'Except that it belongs to Papa.'

'Ah yes, I suppose it does. Sir Conrad. He is very well known in the Middle East – I needn't tell you, however. The Allingham Commission, ah! cunning Sir Conrad. He owes something to my country, after that.' He turned from the picture to Grace looking at her rather as if she were a picture, and said, 'Natoire, or Rosalba. You could be by either. Well, we shall see, and time will show.'

'Papa loves France.'

'I'm sure he does. The Englishmen who love France are always the worst.'

'The worst?'

'Each man kills the thing he loves, you know. Never mind.'

'You've come from Cairo?' she said. 'I thought I read Cairo in your letter and something about Hughie? You saw him?'

'The fiancé I saw.'

'And you've come to give me news of him?'

'Good news – that is to say no news. Why is this picture labelled Drouais?'

'I suppose it is by Drouais,' said Grace with perfect indifference. Brought up among beautiful things, she took but small account of them.

'Indeed? What makes you think so?'

'Are you an art dealer?'

'An art deal-ee.'

'But you said you had news. Naturally I supposed it was the reason for your visit, to tell this news.'

'Have you any milk chocolate?'

'No, I'm sure we haven't.'

'Never mind.'

'Would you like a cocktail – or a glass of sherry?'

'Sherry, with delight.'

'Did you enjoy Cairo? Hughie says it's great fun.'

'The museum is wonderful – but of course no pictures, while the millionaires, poor dears, have wonderful pictures, for which they've paid wonderful prices (from those ateliers where Renoirs and Van Goghs are painted on purpose for millionaires), but which hardly satisfy one's cravings. Even their Corots are not always by Trouillebert. You see exactly how it is. So this afternoon I went to the National Gallery – shut. That is war. Now you will understand what an oasis I have found in Sir Conrad's drawing-room, though I must have a word with him some time about this Drouais, so called.'

'I'm afraid you won't see many pictures in London now,' said Grace. 'Papa has sent all his best ones to the country, and most people have shut up their houses, you know.'

'Never mind. I love London, even without pictures, and English women I love.'

'Do you? Don't we seem terribly dowdy?'

'Of course. That's what make you so amusing and mysterious. What can you possibly do, all day?'

'Do?'

'Yes. How do you fill those endless eons of time when Frenchwomen are having their hair washed, trying on hats, visiting the collections, discussing with the *lingère* – what is *lingère* in English?'

'Underclothes-maker.'

'Hours they spend with the underclothes-maker. What a funny word – are you sure? Anyhow, Frenchwomen always give one to

understand that arranging themselves is full-time work. Now you English, like flowers in a basket, are not arranged, which is quite all right when the flowers are spring flowers.' He gave her another long, approving look. 'But how do you fill in the time? That is the great puzzle.'

'I'm afraid,' she said, laughing, 'that we fill it in (not now, of course, but before the war) buying clothes and hats and having our hair washed. Perhaps the results were not quite the same, but I assure you that great efforts were made.'

'Please don't tell me. Do leave me in the dark, it makes you so much more interesting. Do let me go on believing that the hours drift by in a dream, that those blind blue eyes which see nothing, not even your father's pictures, are turned inward upon some Anglo-Saxon fairyland of your own. Am I not right?'

He was quite right, though perhaps she hardly knew it herself. She thought it over and then said,

'Just before the war I used to have a terribly thrilling dream about escaping from the Germans.'

'One must always escape from Germans. They are so very dull.'

'But now my life is as flat as a pancake, and I can hardly bear it. I quite – almost – long for bombs.'

'I am sorry to have to say that when life is flat it is your own fault. To me it is never flat.'

'Are you never bored?'

'I am sometimes bored by people, but never by life.'

'Oh how lucky.'

'Perhaps I'll take you out dancing. But where? The night clubs here must be terrible.'

'It depends on who you go with.'

'I see. Like all night clubs everywhere. So, I pick you up at eight? I love the black-out. I am trained to be a night bomber – I have flown behind the German lines dropping delightful leaflets, so of course I can find my way by the stars. This gives me confidence, sometimes misplaced I am obliged to own. Then we'll dine at the Connaught Hotel, where I'm staying, and where they have a very

good *plat sucré*. What is *plat sucré* in English? – don't tell me, I know, pudding.'

'How d'you know such wonderful English?'

'My mother was. Still it is rather wonderful, isn't it? I can recite the whole of the *Excursion*, but not now. So eight o'clock then.'

'I'll be quite ready,' said Grace.

The Frenchman ran downstairs and out of the house, and she saw him from the window running towards St James's Park. Then she went up to her room, pulled a lot of clothes from various drawers and cupboards, laid them on her bed, and hovered about wondering what on earth she should wear. Nothing seemed somehow quite suitable.

Nanny came in. 'Good gracious! The room looks like a jumble sale.'

'Run me a bath, darling. I'm going out to dinner with that Frenchman.'

'Are you, dear? And what's his name?'

'Bother. I never asked him.'

'Oh well,' said Nanny, 'one French name is very much like another, I dare say.'

2

His name was Charles-Edouard de Valhubert. About a month later he said to Grace, 'Perhaps I will marry you.'

Grace, in love as never before, tried to keep her head and not to look as if about to faint with happiness.

'Will you?' she said. 'Why?'

'In ten days I go back to the Middle East. The war will begin soon, anything may happen, and I need a son.'

'How practical you are.'

'Yes. I am French. *Mais après le mariage – mince de – nettoyage, – La belle-mère! – on s'assied dessus!*' he sang. He was for ever singing little snatches of songs like that. 'But you won't have a *belle-mère*, unfortunately, since she died, poor dear, many years ago.'

'I must remind you,' said Grace, 'that I am engaged to somebody else.'

'I must remind you that your behaviour lately has not been the behaviour of a faithful fiancée.'

'A little flirtation means nothing at all. I am engaged, and that's that.'

'Engaged. But not married and not in love.'

'Fond.'

'Indeed?'

'You really did see Hughie in Cairo?'

'I saw him plain. He said, "Going to London are you? Do look up Grace." Not very clever of him. So I looked up. He is very dull.'

'Very handsome.'

'Yes. So perhaps on Wednesday?'

'Wednesday what?'

'The marriage? I will now go and call on your father – where can I find him?'

'At this time of day he'll be at the House.'

'How little did I ever think I should end up as the son-in-law of the Allingham Commission. How strange is one's fate. Then I'll come back and take you out to dinner.'

The next day Sir Conrad Allingham went to see Mrs O'Donovan, a widow with whom he had had for many years a loving friendship. Sir Conrad preferred actually making love, a pastime to which he devoted a good deal of energy, with those whose profession it is, finding it embarrassing, never really able to let himself go, with women whom he met in other circumstances. But he liked the company of woman to an extent rare among Englishmen, and often went to chat for an hour or so with Mrs O'Donovan in her light sunny little house which looked over Chelsea Hospital. She was always at home, always glad to receive a visitor, and had a large following among the more intellectual of the right-wing politicians. Her regard for Sir Conrad was special; she spoke of him as 'my Conrad' and was out to other callers when he came to see her. It was said that he never took a step without asking her advice first.

He said, without preamble, 'Have you seen Charles-Edouard de Valhubert?'

'Priscilla's son?'

'Yes.'

'Is he in London?'

'He's been in London several weeks, courting Grace so it seems.'

'Conrad! How extraordinary! What's he like?'

'Really, you know, irresistible. Came to see me at the House yesterday – wants to marry her. I knew nothing – but nothing. I thought Grace was buried in that First Aid Post, and, of course, I've been busy myself. Rather too bad of her really – here I am presented with this *fait accompli*.'

'Well, but what about Hughie?'

'What indeed? Mind you, my sympathies with Hughie are limited – he ought to have married her before he went away.'

'Poor Hughie, he was longing to. He thought it wouldn't be fair.'

'What rubbish though. He leaves a position utterly undefended, he can't be surprised if it falls into – well, Allied hands. I never cared for him, as you know, quite half-baked and tells no jokes. However, she didn't ask my advice when she became engaged to him, nor did she ask it before breaking the engagement (if, indeed, she has remembered to do so). Clearly it doesn't matter what I think. So much for Hughie. He has made his exit all right.'

'I can see that you're pleased, really.'

'Yes and no. Valhubert is quite a chap I will say, tall, attractive (very much like his father to look at, much better dressed). He is clearly great fun. But I don't like the idea of Grace marrying a frog, to tell the truth.'

'Conrad! With your love for the French?' Mrs O'Donovan loved the French too. She had once spent several months in Paris as a child; it had touched her imagination in some way, and she had hankered to live there ever since. This love was one of the strongest links between her and Sir Conrad. They both belonged to the category of English person, not rare among the cultivated classes, and not the least respectable of their race, who can find almost literally nothing to criticize where the French are concerned.

'Only because of Grace's special character,' he said. 'Try and picture her mooning about in Paris society. She would be a lamb among wolves; it makes me shudder to think of it.'

'I'm not sure – after all she's a beauty, and that means a great deal more in France than it does here.'

'Yes, with the men. I'm thinking of the women. They'll make short work of our poor Grace, always in the clouds.'

'Perhaps her clouds will protect her.'

'In a way, but I'm afraid she's deeply romantic, and Valhubert has a roving eye if ever there was one. Don't I remember that Priscilla was very unhappy? There used to be rumours –'

Mrs O'Donovan delved in her mind for everything she had