



# NANCY MITTFORD



*Wigs on the Green*

# Wigs on the Green

NANCY MITFORD



*Introduction by Charlotte Mosley*



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](http://www.penguin.com)

First published by Thornton Butterworth, Ltd., 1935

Published with a new introduction in Penguin Books 2010

## 2

Copyright © The Estate of Nancy Mitford, 1935

Introduction copyright © Charlotte Mosley, 2010

The moral right of the author of the introduction has been asserted

All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright  
reserved above, no part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system,  
or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior  
written permission of both the copyright owner and  
the above publisher of this book

Set in Dante MT 11/13pt

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-141-04746-1

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future  
for our business, our readers and our planet.  
The book in your hands is made from paper  
certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

## Introduction

*Wigs on the Green*, originally published in 1935, is Nancy Mitford's third novel. Like its predecessors, it is a light, accomplished comedy of manners, complete with Wodehousian conventions of a rich heiress, rivals in love, legacies from an aunt, broken engagements, assumed identities and a happy ending. But unlike her other books, *Wigs on the Green* was never reprinted during Nancy's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> In the three years following the publication of her second novel, *Christmas Pudding*, her own world and the world beyond had become less carefree places. Hitler was in absolute power in Germany and two of her sisters, Diana and Unity, had attended a Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg and become his fervent admirers. When Nancy's publisher begged her to be allowed to reissue the novel in 1951, she refused. 'Too much has happened for jokes about Nazis to be regarded as funny or as anything but the worst of taste,' she wrote to Evelyn Waugh, 'so that is out.'

As in all her books, Nancy drew freely on family and friends for inspiration and *Wigs on the Green*, despite its opening disclaimer that the characters are drawn from imagination, is closely autobiographical. Captain Jack, the leader of the Union Jackshirts (a precursor of P. G. Wodehouse's farcical aspiring dictator Roderick Spode, leader of the Black Shorts) is modelled on Diana's lover and future husband, Sir Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists. Eugenia Malmains, the rebellious heiress and Jackshirt enthusiast, is a thinly disguised portrait of Unity, who moved to Munich in 1934 to learn German and fulfil her ambition

<sup>1</sup> An American mass-market paperback, the only post-war edition of *Wigs on the Green*, was published in 1976 in a single volume with Nancy's first novel, *Highland Fling* (1931).

of meeting Hitler. Nancy's distaste for republishing – just six years after the end of the war – a book that poked fun at Fascism and sent up Hitler is understandable, but it was not the only reason why she was reluctant to see the novel back in print.

Nancy's first two books had pigeonholed her as a lightweight novelist of the cocktail party/country-house weekend/society gossip-column variety. *Highland Fling* was recognized by *The Times Literary Supplement* for its 'infectious gaiety', and *Christmas Pudding* praised for keeping the reader 'laughing through its pages', but the same newspaper gave *Wigs on the Green* a disparaging review, describing it as an 'extravaganza' in which the humour was 'too clumsy to achieve the desired result.' Nancy was under no illusion that her pre-war novels were masterpieces ('*Christmas Pudding* is pathetic, badly written, facetious & awful,' she wrote – exaggeratedly – to Evelyn Waugh), but she also knew that they had value as period pieces, were very good entertainment and extremely funny in parts. It was not professional pride, therefore, that decided her against reissuing *Wigs on the Green*. The main reason for her refusal, apart from the jokes about Nazis, was that the book had caused such furious reactions within the Mitford family: Unity threatened never to speak to her again and Diana, who had recently divorced her first husband for Mosley, more or less broke off relations until the end of the war. Added to this, no doubt, was Nancy's unwillingness to revive the memory of Unity's suicide attempt in 1939 and her consequent death in 1948.

A consummate tease, Nancy could never take politics, or indeed anything, very seriously. Her way of dealing with life was to treat everything, on the surface at least, as a huge joke. As the eldest of the six Mitford sisters, she had communicated this attitude to her siblings and it pervaded the family atmosphere. The earnestness with which Diana, Unity and the fifth sister, Jessica – who became a Communist – embraced extreme politics broke the unwritten Mitford code that nothing was too important not to be laughed at. Nancy also had an instinctive distrust of ideologies. 'There isn't a pin to put between Nazis & Bolshies, if one is a Jew one prefers

one & if an aristocrat the other that's all as far as I can see. *Fiends*,' she wrote to a family friend at the outbreak of war. Politics for Nancy came down to personalities; people, not ideas, were what counted. When she turned from fiction to writing about French history, she was accused by historians of retelling tales of Mitford family life. 'Very true,' she wrote to Jessica, 'History is always subjective & the books we yawn over are often the descriptions of the home life of some dreary old professors.'

In spite of its references to the politics of the day, *Wigs on the Green* is above all an exploration of love and marriage – themes to which Nancy returned in all her books – and it is dedicated to her husband, Peter Rodd, renegade son of the diplomat Sir Rennell Rodd. When she began writing it, in spring 1934, she had been married to Peter for just a few months; long enough, however, to take a cynical view of marriage: 'It's such a fearful gamble. Much better put your money on a horse and be out of your misery at once,' says Jasper Aspect, the unscrupulous, heavy-drinking womaniser whose character owes a great deal to Peter and, to a lesser extent, Basil Murray, his Oxford contemporary. (The raffish pair had already served as the inspiration for Basil Seal, Evelyn Waugh's delinquent anti-hero in *Black Mischief*.) Nancy and Peter rushed into marriage in a whirlwind of euphoria. Peter was nearing thirty and seems to have regarded matrimony as a last resort, having failed in everything else. He was no doubt fond of Nancy in his way but treated her, like all his women, callously, and enjoyed boasting to his friends that he had proposed to all sorts of women and that she was the only one 'fool enough' to accept him. At twenty-nine – an age when unmarried women were getting on for being old maids in the 1930s – Nancy was on the rebound from an affair that had limped on for four years with Hamish Erskine, a homosexual friend of her brother, and she fell for Peter's insolent, tow-headed charm.

An eternal romantic despite her merciless wit, Nancy willed herself to be in love and managed to shut her eyes to Peter's true character for the six months they were engaged, writing to a friend

that she was in a 'haze of insane happiness' and urging everybody to get married if they wanted 'a receipt for absolute bliss'. Perhaps the p.s. in her letter, 'Please excuse these lunatic ravings', hints that at some level she recognized that marrying Peter was madness. By the time they got back from honeymoon, the romance had fizzled out. They began married life in a small house in Strand-on-the-Green, Chiswick, subsisting on a slender allowance from both sets of parents and the money that Nancy could scrape together from writing.

Nancy grew up at a time when marriage was virtually the only career open to women of her background. A marriage must be kept going at any cost and a wife should defer to her husband. The example of the Mitfords' parents, Lord and Lady Redesdale, was deeply instilled in their children in this respect. In *Wigs on the Green* Nancy takes a clear-eyed, sardonic look at her predicament. 'These vague romantic impulses won't do anybody any good, and least of all yourself,' Poppy St Julien remarks briskly to Lady Marjorie Merrith, who has broken off her engagement to the Duke of Dartford because she is not in love. 'There are times, my dear old boy,' Jasper Aspect lectures the fortune-hunting Noel Foster, 'when love has got to take its proper place as an unethical and anti-social emotion.' Nancy is trying, not always convincingly but with a notable lack of ill humour, to set aside disappointment and get down to the business of being married. When Jasper disparages the 'precious little poppet' who likes to have 'a nice long cosy chat' on the telephone in the morning, Nancy is ridiculing her love of chatting, her favourite form of intimacy. There is something almost admiring in her oblique references to Peter's financial irresponsibility: 'Wives aren't expected to keep their husbands,' says Poppy. 'I never could see why not. It seems so unfair,' Jasper replies. When Poppy points out that it is the least men can do when women go through all the trouble of pregnancy, Jasper retorts, 'Well, us boys have hang overs don't we? Comes to the same thing in the end.'

If Peter's reaction to being portrayed by his wife as a wastrel and a cad – however engaging – went unrecorded, Diana and

Unity's response to Nancy's satire did not. Diana met Oswald Mosley in early 1932, when she was twenty-one and had been married to Bryan Guinness, heir to a brewing fortune, for three years. Mosley, a Conservative, Independent then, briefly, Labour MP, had broken with mainstream politics and was preparing to launch the British Union of Fascists. He was persuaded that the existing system of government could not deal with the severe economic and social problems caused by the Great Depression, and believed that a movement, organised along paramilitary lines, was needed to take control of the economy and combat the inevitable rise of Communism. Putting his followers into military-style uniform and modelling himself on Mussolini's brand of Fascism, Mosley seemed to Diana to have all the answers to Britain's woes. That he was married and a notorious philanderer did not prevent her from falling deeply in love. By the end of the year she had asked Bryan for a divorce and moved into her own house in Eaton Square, London. When Mosley's wife died in 1933, Diana became his *maîtresse en titre* and married him three years later. Her conversion to his ideas was immediate and lifelong; like a tiger protecting its cub, she would leap to her beloved Leader's defence whenever he was under attack.

Initially, Nancy hoped that *Wigs on the Green* would amuse Diana, who seemed not to have minded a caricature of Mosley in 'The Old Ladies', an unpublished story she wrote in 1933 in which the 'Little Leader' was cast as a figure of fun who visited the old ladies 'armed only with two revolvers, a bowie-knife and a bar of Ex Lax, the delicious chocolate laxative'. The first indication that *Wigs on the Green* might cause real trouble came when Nancy had already written more than half of it. In November 1934, Mosley won a libel suit against the *Daily News* for an article published in the *Star* and was awarded £5,000 in damages. Peter Rodd was worried that he might take legal action against Nancy, who could not afford to fight a case and desperately needed royalties from the book. Nancy quickly wrote a placating letter to Diana, promising to let her edit the novel before publication and assuring her



that even though it contained 'one or two jokes' it was very pro-Fascism. Diana was not mollified. The BUF was losing support; its militaristic, anti-Semitic stance was discrediting it in the eyes of the public, and its image had been badly damaged by the violence that broke out between Blackshirts and anti-Fascist hecklers at the infamous Olympia rally in June 1934. The idea that her sister might in any way harm Mosley's reputation infuriated Diana. Nancy refused to abandon the book but she did agree to remove nearly everything directly relating to Captain Jack – some three chapters altogether. Shortly before publication, she sent Diana another cajoling letter, attempting to justify her position, 'Honestly, if I thought it could set the Leader back by so much as half an hour I would have scrapped it, or indeed never written it in the first place . . . I still maintain that it is far more in favour of Fascism than otherwise. Far the nicest character in the book is a Fascist, the others all become much nicer as soon as they have joined up. But I also know your point of view, that Fascism is something too serious to be dealt with in a funny book at all. Surely that is a little unreasonable?'

Diana was not appeased. She froze Nancy out of her life for several years and never invited her to Wootton Lodge, the house in Staffordshire where the Mosleys lived between 1936 and 1940. When Diana was imprisoned in Holloway for three-and-a-half years during the war – under Defence Regulation 18B, which allowed the government to hold without charge anyone suspected of Nazi sympathies – her letters and visitors were restricted. Nancy wrote to her half-a-dozen times and did go to visit her, but relations only really began to thaw after the Mosleys were released and Nancy went to stay with them to finish *The Pursuit of Love*. The two sisters never referred to *Wigs on the Green* again in their voluminous correspondence, or indeed discussed the war or politics – subjects that would have made reconciliation difficult. Diana found out only after Nancy's death that in 1940 she had denounced her to the Foreign Office as 'a far more dangerous character' than Mosley and had urged that she be put in prison. And she never found out that Nancy had protested against her release in 1943,

claiming that she was 'wildly ambitious, a ruthless and shrewd egotist, a devoted Fascist and admirer of Hitler'. Had Diana known, reconciliation would no doubt have been impossible.

The disparaging references to divorce that are sprinkled throughout *Wigs on the Green* must also have irritated Diana. Eugenia Malmain's grandmother, Lady Chalford – an adumbration of Lady Redesdale – deems the death of her son from wounds received the day before the Armistice a lesser disaster than the fact of his divorce, and regards with horror 'the tainted blood of an adulteress' that Eugenia carries in her veins. Nancy did not approve of Diana leaving Bryan but had supported her decision. The Redesdales, however, were appalled, particularly by the fact that it was Diana who petitioned Bryan for divorce on the grounds of adultery. At the time, it was common for a man to assume the role of the 'guilty party' and arrange to be caught at a seaside hotel with a tart, but Diana's parents thought it wrong and were deeply shocked that she should go along with it.

Diana's reaction to the publication of *Wigs on the Green* affected not only the two sisters' relationship, but also eradicated any of Nancy and Peter's pro-Fascist leanings. 'I hope', Unity wrote to Diana in November 1934, 'that that utter swine Peter has resigned his membership *publicly*.' Nancy, having considered herself a Socialist, joined the BUF soon after she married, partly because Peter was initially enthusiastic about the movement and partly, no doubt, to support Diana. The two sisters had grown particularly close during the year before Nancy married, when Diana lent her a room at Eaton Square and they had seen a great deal of each other. Nancy and Peter had attended the Olympia meeting and Diana must have hoped they were true converts to Mosley's cause. Nancy never liked Mosley himself – 'Sir Ogre' as she called him – and had an instinctive aversion to the violence implicit in his methods, but at first she defended his policies. Indeed there were aspects of the Fascist viewpoint that chimed with her own. Evelyn Waugh reminded her many years later that they had quarrelled after she attended a BUF meeting at the Albert Hall. 'Did we,' Nancy

replied, 'I'd quite forgotten. I remember Prod [Peter] looked very pretty in a black shirt. But we were young & high spirited then & didn't know about Buchenwald.' Nancy shared with Fascism the belief that Western civilisation was decaying and in need of change; but while the BUF's millenarian vision was of a bright new Britain, she looked back with nostalgia to a vanished past, where a public-spirited aristocracy still lived on the land and where 'sensible men of ample means' ruled the country – a patrician point of view that threads through much of her writing.

Even when being sincere, Nancy could not take herself seriously. In July 1934 she contributed an article, 'Fascism as I See It', to the *Vanguard*, a journal edited by Alexander Ratcliffe, the anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic founder of the Scottish Protestant League. It is a curious piece of writing, not least because much of it is an only slightly toned-down version of the hymn to Fascism that Eugenia proclaims from an overturned washtub at the beginning of *Wigs on the Green*. It is not clear whether Nancy wrote the article then realised she had the germ of a novel, or whether she had already started *Wigs on the Green* and conveniently lifted Eugenia's speech for the *Vanguard*. Nor is it known why she agreed to contribute to the magazine in the first place; *Vogue* and *The Lady* had been the usual outlets for her journalism until then. The article begins soberly enough by explaining that Fascism was an attitude of mind that could no more be understood by people of the old school than Picasso by admirers of representational art. It goes on, with mounting pomposity, to decry the moral turpitude of an age where 'respect for parents, love of the home, veneration of the marriage tie' was at a discount and where allegiance to 'a great and good Leader' was the one thing that could lift the country 'from the slough of despond in which for too long it has weltered.' It ends on a note of pure bombast – as does Eugenia's peroration – with the description of old politicians creeping about Westminster like withered tortoises, 'warming themselves in the synthetic sunlight of each others' approbation,' before being commanded by the Leader to choose between 'ignominy and a Roman death.'

The article was taken seriously by Edgell Rickword, the Communist founding editor of *Left Review*, who described it in that journal as 'a very well-developed case of leaderolatry'. But Unity was not deceived and realised that Nancy was parodying Mosley at his most messianic. 'I'm furious about it,' she wrote to her, 'You might have a little thought for poor me, all the boys know that you're my sister you know.' In the same letter, she struck a cautioning note about *Wigs on the Green*, 'Now seriously, about that book. I have heard a bit about it from Muv [Lady Redesdale], & I warn you you can't *possibly* publish it, so you'd better not waste any more time on it. Because if you did publish it I couldn't *possibly* ever speak to you again.'

Unity's reaction on reading the novel is not recorded. Shortly after its publication, she admitted to Diana that she had not yet read it but that Nancy had written to assure her that she wouldn't mind it, in fact that she would 'positively like it', adding, 'she [Nancy] does have quaint ideas.' Perhaps when Unity eventually came to read the book she found her portrait as a beautiful blonde goddess sufficiently gratifying to take the sting out of Nancy's teases. Certainly the few surviving letters exchanged between the sisters after publication are in the same light-hearted tone as before, with Nancy addressing her sister affectionately as 'Head of Bone and Heart of Stone', and joshing her with a poem in mock German.

When Nancy was writing *Wigs on the Green*, Unity had not yet met Hitler, his policies had not yet resulted in systematic genocide and it was still possible – by turning a blind eye to the nature of the regime – to believe that National Socialism could regenerate Germany and usher in an era of peace in Europe. Unity was an impressionable nineteen-year-old when she accompanied Diana to the 1933 Nuremberg Parteitag and came under the spell of Nazism, and just twenty-five when Britain declared war on Germany. Unable to face a conflict between the two countries she loved, she went to a public garden in Munich and put a pistol to her head. The bullet failed to kill her but left her brain-damaged and she died of meningitis nine years later. During the five years

she spent in Germany, Unity came to know Hitler personally and embraced the Nazi creed whole-heartedly, including its most virulent anti-Semitism. Nazism, as she wrote to a cousin, 'is my religion, not merely my political party'.

The dark side of Unity's character is plain enough to see: ruthlessness, naïveté and a love of showing off, combined with an attraction to violence and a desire to shock, produced moral blindness of an extreme kind. More difficult to understand is what so endeared her to those who loved her, which her family and friends did, however much they deplored her politics. The bond between the Mitford sisters was strong but it did not stop Jessica from cutting Diana out of her life when politics drove them apart; yet she never broke off relations with Unity, even though they took opposite political sides. 'So what was lovable about her?' Jessica wrote to Unity's biographer, 'and why did I adore her, which I really did . . . There is a dimension, or facet, of her character missing in your book; but what is it, exactly? . . . Well she was so 'uge and obdgejoinable,<sup>2</sup> such a joke, after *Wigs on the Green* partly a Nancy-created joke – and she [Unity] saw the joke of herself.' Diana described her as 'intelligent and affectionate' and her funeral as the saddest day of her life. To Deborah, the youngest sister, she was, 'funny and loyal and brave'. Lady Redesdale, who assumed the demanding task of caring for her daughter after her suicide attempt, wrote after her death, 'I shall miss her always, she was a most rare character.'

In *Wigs on the Green*, the riddle that was Unity is seen through her eldest sister's distinctive lens. Nancy paints a caricature of an already larger-than-life young woman, under-educated, over-protected and wilful, who takes up politics to fill the void of boredom that is her life. The adolescent aspects of the Jackshirt movement – belonging to a gang, dressing-up in uniform and devotion to a leader – appeal to her strongly; just as the emotional charge of Fascism did to the youth of the 1930s. 'When you find

<sup>2</sup> 'Huge and objectionable' in Boudledidge, the private language in which Unity and Jessica communicated as children.

schoolgirls like Eugenia going mad about something,' one of the characters declares, 'you can be pretty sure that it is nonsense.' Nancy, like many others at the time, underestimated the lethal consequences of the 'nonsense'.

The novel is Nancy's attempt to make sense of a phenomenon that would ultimately tear Europe and her family apart. When you add to this some vintage Mitfordian jokes and teases (and in Peersmont, the lunatic asylum for batty peers, one of her best conceits) it becomes a very fascinating book indeed. However understandable her objections were to its re-publication three quarters of a century ago, today Nancy's fans and all those curious about a particular slice of twentieth-century history will welcome its return.

Charlotte Mosley

## I

'No, I'm sorry,' said Noel Foster, 'not sufficiently attractive.'

He said this in unusually firm and final accents, and with a determination which for him was rare he hung up his office telephone receiver. He leant back in his chair. 'That's the last time,' he thought. Never again, except possibly in regard to the heiresses he now intended to pursue, would he finish long and dreary conversations with the words, 'Not sufficiently attractive.'

Now that he was leaving the office for good he felt himself in no particular hurry to be off. Unlike other Friday evenings he made no dash for the street; on the contrary he sat still and took a long gloating look round that room which for the last two years had been his prison. With the heavenly knowledge that he would never see them again he was able to gaze in perfect detachment at the stained-glass windows (a cheerful amber shade, full of bubbles too, just like champagne), and the old oak furnishing – which made such a perfectly delightful setting for the charms of Miss Clumps the pretty typist, Miss Brisket the plain typist, and Mr Farmer the head clerk. This amiable trio had been his fellow prisoners for the last two years, he most sincerely hoped never to see any of them again. He said goodbye to them cordially enough, however, took his hat and his umbrella, and then, rich and free, he sauntered into the street.

He had not yet had time since good fortune had befallen him to leave his dreary lodging in Ebury Street, and as a matter of habit returned to it now. He then rang up Jasper Aspect. This he did knowing perfectly well that it was a mistake of the first order. Poor young men who have just received notice of agreeable but moderate legacies can do nothing more stupid than to ring up Jasper Aspect. Noel, who had been intimate with Jasper for most of his

life, was aware that he was behaving with deplorable indiscretion, nevertheless some irresistible impulse led him to the telephone where the following conversation took place:

'Hullo Jasper?'

'My dear old boy, I was just going to ring you up myself.'

'Oh, what are you doing to-night?'

'I thought it would be exceedingly agreeable to take a little dinner off you.'

'All right, I wanted to see you; where shall we dine – how about Boulestins? Meet you there at eight?'

'Look here, I haven't got any money, you know.'

'That's all right,' said Noel. He would keep his glorious news until such time as he could see the incredulity and disgust which would no doubt illumine Jasper's honest countenance when it was broken to him. Jasper now once more proclaimed his inability to pay, was once more reassured and rang off.

'This is all exceedingly mysterious,' he said when they met.

'Why?' said Noel.

'Well, my dear old boy, it isn't every day of the week one can get a free meal off you, let alone an expensive one like this is going to be. Why did you choose me for the jolly treat? I find it very puzzling indeed.'

'Oh! I wanted to see you. I want your advice about one or two things actually, and after all one must eat somewhere, so why not here?' And fishing for his handkerchief he produced, as though by accident, and replaced with nonchalance, a roll of ten pound notes.

Jasper's expression did not change however, as Noel had hopefully anticipated that it would. He merely ordered another champagne cocktail. When it came he said, 'Well, here's to the Scrubs old boy, hope you'll find it comfy there, you can come and see me sometimes in between terms, I'm never at all up-stage about my jail-bird friends.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Noel, coldly.

'Don't you? Well it's fairly obvious that you've got the skates on, isn't it? And I suppose you want me to help you get away with



the dough. Now I suggest that we should go fifty-fifty on it, and do a bunk together. That suit you?’

‘No.’

‘First of all you had better tell me frankly if you are wanted. I’ve been wanted in Paris, and not wanted anywhere else, for simply ages, there’s nothing I don’t know on the subject of wanting.’

‘My dear old boy,’ said Noel, comfortably. ‘I’m afraid you’ve got hold of the wrong end of the stick.’

‘But you came to me for advice.’

‘Yes, I did, I thought you might be able to put me in touch with some rich girl who would like to marry me.’

‘That’s a good one I’m bound to say. To begin with, if I was lucky enough to know any rich girls can you see me handing them out to you? And to go on with, I shouldn’t think the girl is born who would like to marry you.’

‘Oh! nonsense, girls will marry anybody. Besides, I’m a pretty attractive chap you know.’

‘Not very. Anyhow, let me tell you something. Courting heiresses is an exceedingly expensive occupation. You didn’t give me time just then to count exactly how much you have managed to extract from the till, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t enough to finance a racket of that sort. Why, you don’t know what these girls run you in for, nights out, lunches, orchids, weekends to all parts of the Continent, that’s not the beginning, I’ve been through it, I know what I’m talking about. I suppose the worst part of it,’ he went on, warming to his subject, ‘is the early-morning telephoning. The precious little poppet, buried in lace pillows, likes to have a nice long cosy chat between 9 and 10 a.m., she doesn’t realize that you, meanwhile, are shivering half-way up your landlady’s staircase with an old woman scrubbing the linoleum round your feet. And what’s the end of it all? When she marries her Roumanian prince she may remember to ask you to be one of those pretty young gentlemen who leave the guests to find their own pews at weddings. It’s all fearfully dismal I can tell you.’

‘How you do talk,’ said Noel admiringly. ‘Just like a book. I wonder you don’t write one.’