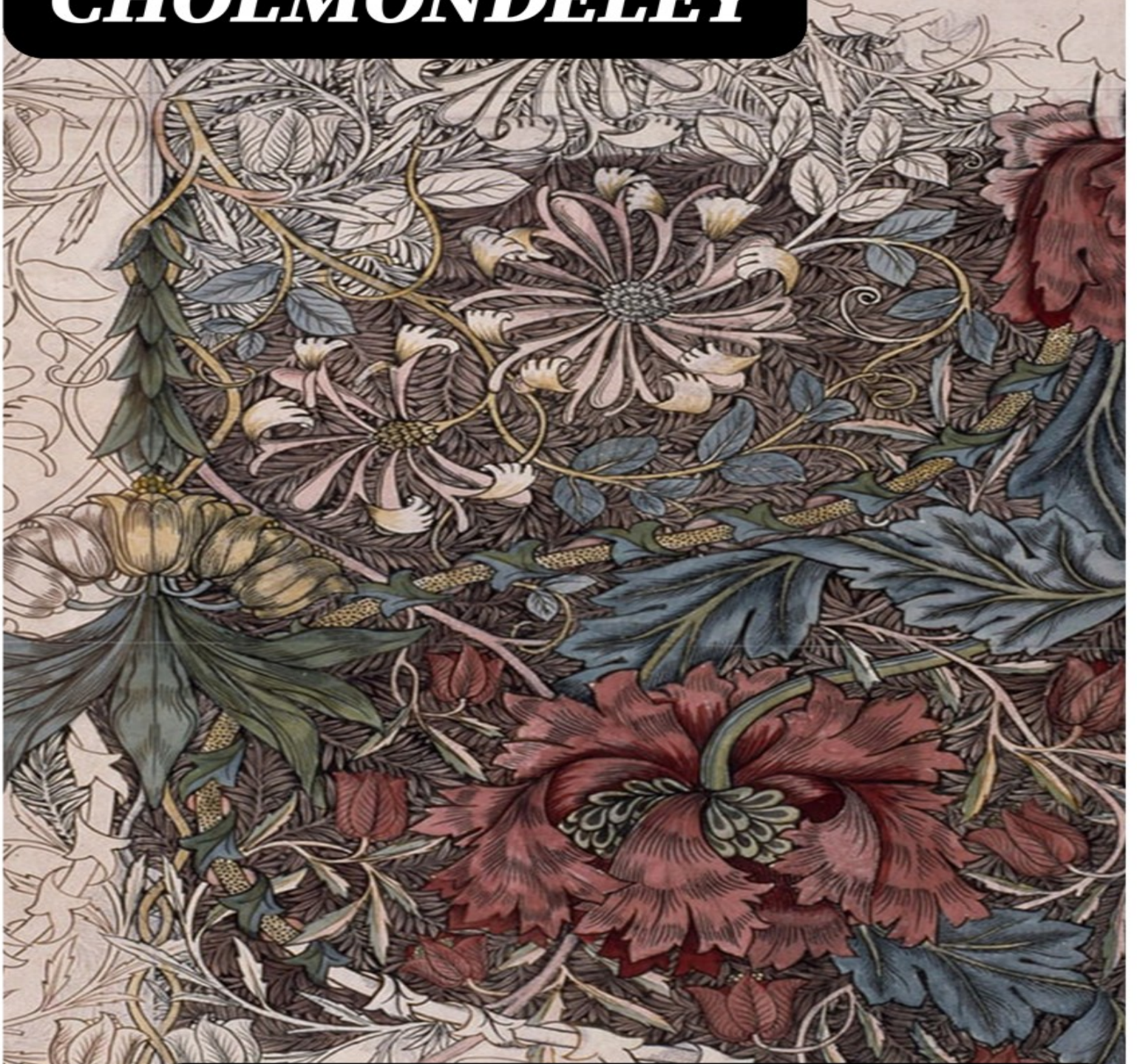


**MARY
CHOLMONDELEY**



**THE LOWEST
RUNG**

Mary Cholmondeley

The Lowest Rung

**Together with The Hand on the Latch, St. Luke's
Summer and The Understudy**

EAN 8596547207429

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PREFACE

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I HAVE been writing books for five-and-twenty years, novels of which I believe myself to be the author, in spite of the fact that I have been assured over and over again that they are not my own work. When I have on several occasions ventured to claim them, I have seldom been believed, which seems the more odd as, when others have claimed them, they have been believed at once. Before I put my name to them they were invariably considered to be, and reviewed as, the work of a man; and for years after I had put my name to them various men have been mentioned to me as the real author.

I remember once, when I was very young and shy, how at one of my first London dinner-parties a charming elderly man discussed one of my earliest books with such appreciation that I at last remarked that I had written it myself. If I had looked for a surprised flash of delight at the fact that so much talent was palpitating in white muslin beside him, I was doomed to be disappointed. He gravely and gently said, "I know that to be untrue," and the conversation was turned to other subjects.

One man did indeed actually announce himself to be the author of "Red Pottage," in the presence of a large number of people, including the late Mr. William Sharp, who related the occurrence to me. But the incident ended uncomfortably for the claimant, which one would have thought he might have foreseen.

But whether my books are mine or not, still whenever one of them appears the same thing happens. I am pressed to own that such-and-such a character "is taken from So-and-so." I have not yet yielded to these exhortations to confession, partly, no doubt, because it would be very awkward for me afterwards if I owned that thirty different persons were the one and only original of "So-and-so."

My character for uprightness (if I ever had one) has never survived my tacit, or in some cases emphatic, refusal to be squeezed through the "clefts of confession."

It is perhaps impossible for those who do not write fiction to form any conception how easily an erroneous idea gains credence that some one has been "put in a book"; or, if the idea has once been entertained, how impossible it is to eradicate it.

Looking back over a string of incidents of this kind in my own personal experience, covering the last five-and-twenty years, I feel doubtful whether I shall be believed if I instance some of them. They seem now, after the lapse of years, frankly incredible, and yet they were real enough to give me not a little pain at the time. It is the fashion nowadays, if one says anything about oneself, to preface it by the pontifical remark that what one writes is penned for the sake of others, to save them, to cheer them, etc., etc. This, of course, now I come to think of it, must be my reason also for my lapse into autobiography. I see now that I only do it out of tenderness for the next generation. Therefore, young writers of the future, now on the playing-fields of Eton, take notice that my heart yearns over you. If, later on, you are harrowed as I have been harrowed, remember

J'ai passé par là.

Observe the prints of my goloshes on the steep ascent, and take courage. And if you are perturbed, as I have been perturbed, let me whisper to you the exhortation of the bankrupt to the terrestrial globe:

Never *you* mind. Roll on.

When I first took a pen into my youthful hand, I lived in a very secluded part of the Midlands, and perhaps, my little world being what it was, it was inevitable that the originals of my characters, especially the tiresome ones, should be immediately identified with the kindly neighbours within a five-mile radius of my paternal Rectory. Five miles was about the utmost our little pony could do. It was therefore obviously impossible that I could be acquainted with any one beyond that distance. And from first to last, from that day to this, no one leading a secluded life has been so fatuous as to believe that my characters were evolved out of my inner consciousness. "After all, you must own you took them from *some one*," is a phrase which has long lost its novelty for me. I remember even now my shocked astonishment when a furious neighbour walked up to me and said, "We all recognised Mrs. Alwynn at once as Mrs. —, *and we all say it is not in the least like her.*"

It was not, indeed. There was no shadow of resemblance. Did Mrs.—, who had been so kind to me from a child, ever hear that report, I wonder? It gave me many a miserable hour, just when I was expanding in the sunshine of my first favourable reviews.

When I was still quite a beginner, Mrs. Clifford published her beautiful and touching book, "Aunt Anne."

There was, I am willing to believe—it is my duty to believe *something*—a faint resemblance between her "Aunt Anne" and an old great-aunt of mine, "Aunt Anna Maria," long since dead, whom I had only seen once or twice when I was a small child.

The fact that I could not have known my departed relation did not prevent two of my cousins, elderly maiden ladies who had had that privilege, from writing to me in great indignation at my having ventured to travesty my old aunt. They had found me out (I am always being found out), and the vials of their wrath were poured out over me.

In my whilom ignorance, in my lamblike innocence of the darker side of human nature, I actually thought that a disclaimer would settle the matter.

When has a disclaimer ever been of any use? When has it ever achieved anything except to add untruthfulness to my other crimes? Why have I ever written one, after that first disastrous essay, in which I civilly pointed out that not I, but Mrs. Clifford, the well-known writer, was the author of "Aunt Anne?"

They replied at once to say that this was untrue, because I, and I alone, *could* have written it.

I showed my father the letter.

The two infuriated ladies were attached to my father, and had known him for many years as a clergyman and a rural dean of unblemished character. He wrote to them himself to assure them that they had made a mistake, that I was not the author of the obnoxious work.

But the only effect his letter had on their minds was a pained uprootal of their respect and long affection for him.

And they both died some years later, and (presumably) went up to heaven, convinced of my guilt, in spite of the unscrupulous parental ruridiaconal effort to whitewash me.

Long afterwards I mentioned this incident to Mrs. Clifford, but it did not cause her surprise. She had had her own experiences. She told me that when "Aunt Anne" appeared, she had many letters from persons with whom she was unacquainted, reproaching her for having portrayed their aunt.

The reverse of the medal ought perhaps to be mentioned. So primitive was the circle in which my youth was passed that an adverse review, if seen by one of the community, was at once put down to a disaffected and totally uneducated person in our village.

A witty but unfavourable criticism in *Punch* of my first story was always believed by two ladies in the parish to have been penned by one of the village tradesmen. It was in vain I assured them that the person in question could not by any possibility be on the staff of *Punch*. They only shook their heads, and repeated mysteriously that they "had reasons for *knowing* he had written it."

When we moved to London, I hoped I might fare better. But evidently I had been born under an unlucky star. The "Aunt Anne" incident proved to be only the first playful ripple which heralded the incoming of the

Breakers of the boundless deep.

After the publication of "Red Pottage" a storm burst respecting one of the characters—Mr. Gresley—which even now I have not forgotten. The personal note was struck once more with vigour, but this time by the clerical arm. I was

denounced by name from a London pulpit. A Church newspaper which shall be nameless suggested that my portrait of Mr. Gresley was merely a piece of spite on my part, as I had probably been jilted by a clergyman. I will not pretend that the turmoil gave me unmixed pain. If it had, I should have been without literary vanity. But when a witty bishop wrote to me that he had enjoined on his clergy the study of Mr. Gresley as a Lenten penance, it was not possible for me to remain permanently depressed.

The character was the outcome of long, close observation of large numbers of clergymen, but not of one particular parson. Why, then, was it so exactly like individual clergymen that I received excited or enthusiastic letters from the parishioners of I dare not say how many parishes, affirming that their vicar (whom I had never beheld), and he alone, could have been the prototype of Mr. Gresley? I was frequently implored to go down and "see for myself." Their most adorable platitudes were chronicled and sent up to me, till I wrung my hands because it was too late to insert them in "Red Pottage."[\[1\]](#) For they all fitted Mr. Gresley like a glove, and I should certainly have used them if it had been possible. For, as has been well said, "There is no copyright in platitudes." They are part of our goodly heritage. And though people like Mr. Gresley and my academic prig Wentworth have in one sense made a particular field of platitude their own, by exercising themselves continually upon it, nevertheless we cannot allow them to warn us off as trespassers, or permit them to annex or enclose common land, the property and birthright of the race.

Young men fresh from public schools also informed me that Mr. Gresley was the facsimile of their tutor, and of no one else. I was at that time unacquainted with any schoolmasters, being cut off from social advantages. But that fact did me no good. The dispassionate statement of it had no more effect on my young friends than my father's denial had on my elderly relations.

I am ashamed to say that once again, as in the case of "Aunt Anne," I endeavoured to exculpate myself in order to pacify two old maiden ladies. Why is it always the acutely unmarried who are made miserable by my books? Is it because—odious thought, avast!—married persons do not open them? These two ladies did not, indeed, think that I had been "paying out" some particular clergyman, as suggested in their favourite paper, *The Guardian*,^[2] but they were shocked by the profanity of the book. Soon afterwards the Bishop of Stepney (now Bishop of London) preached on "Red Pottage" in St. Paul's. I sent them a newspaper which reprinted the sermon *verbatim*, with a note saying that I trusted this expression of opinion on the part of their idolised preacher might mitigate their condemnation of the book.

But when have my attempts at making an effect ever come off? My firework never lights up properly like that of others! It only splutters and goes out. I received in due course a dignified answer that they had both been deeply distressed by my information, as it would prevent them ever going to hear the Bishop of Stepney again.

My own experience, especially as to "Red Pottage" and "Prisoners," struck me as so direful, I seemed so peculiarly

outside the protection of Providence, like the celebrated plot of ground on which "no rain nor no dew never fell," that I consulted several other brother and sister novelists as to how they had fared in this delicate matter. It is not for me to reveal the interesting skeletons concealed in cupboards not my own, but I have almost invariably returned from these interviews cheered, chuckling, and consoled by the comfortable realisation that others had writhed on a hotter gridiron than I.

Georges Sand, when she was accused of lampooning a certain *abbé*, said that to draw one character of that kind one must know a thousand. She has, I think, put her finger on the truth which is not easy to find—at least, I never found it until I read those words of hers.

It is necessary to know a very large number of persons of a certain kind before one can evolve a type. Each he or she contributes a twig, and the author weaves them into a nest. I have no doubt that I must have taken such a twig from nearly every clergyman I met who had a *soupçon* of Mr. Gresley in him.

But if an author takes one tiny trait, one saying, one sentiment, direct from a person, there is always the danger that the contributor will recognise the theft, and, if of a self-regarding temperament, will instantly conclude that the *whole* character is drawn from himself. There is, for instance, no more universal trait, of what has been unkindly called "the old-maid temperament" in either sex, than the assertion that it is always busy. But when such a trait is noted in a book, how many sensitive readers assume that it is a cruel personality. If people could but perceive that what

they think to be character in themselves is often only sex, or sexlessness; if they could but believe in the universality of what they hold to be their individuality! And yet how easily they believe in it when it is pleasant to do so, when they write books about themselves, and thousands of grateful readers bombard the gifted authoress with letters to tell her that they also have "felt just like that," and have "been helped" by her exquisite sentiments, which are the exact replicas of their own!

The worst of it is that with the academic or clerical prig, when the mind has long been permitted to run in a deep, platitudinous groove from which it is at last powerless to escape, the resemblance to a prig in fiction is sometimes more than fanciful. It is real. For there is no doubt that prigs have a horrid family likeness to each other, whether in books or in real life. I have sometimes felt as the puzzled mother of some long-lost Tichborne might feel. Each claimant to the estates in turn seems to acquire a look of the original because he *is* a claimant. Has not this one my lost Willy's eyes? But no! that one has Willy's hands. True, but the last-comer snuffles exactly as my lost Willy snuffled. How many men have begun suddenly and indubitably in my eyes to resemble one of the adored prigs of my novels, merely because they insisted on the likeness themselves.

The most obnoxious accident which has yet befallen me, the most wanton blow below the belt which Fate has ever dealt me, is buried beneath the snows of twenty years. But even now I cannot recall it without a shudder. And if a carping critic ventures to point out that blows below the belt are not often buried beneath snow, then all I can say is that