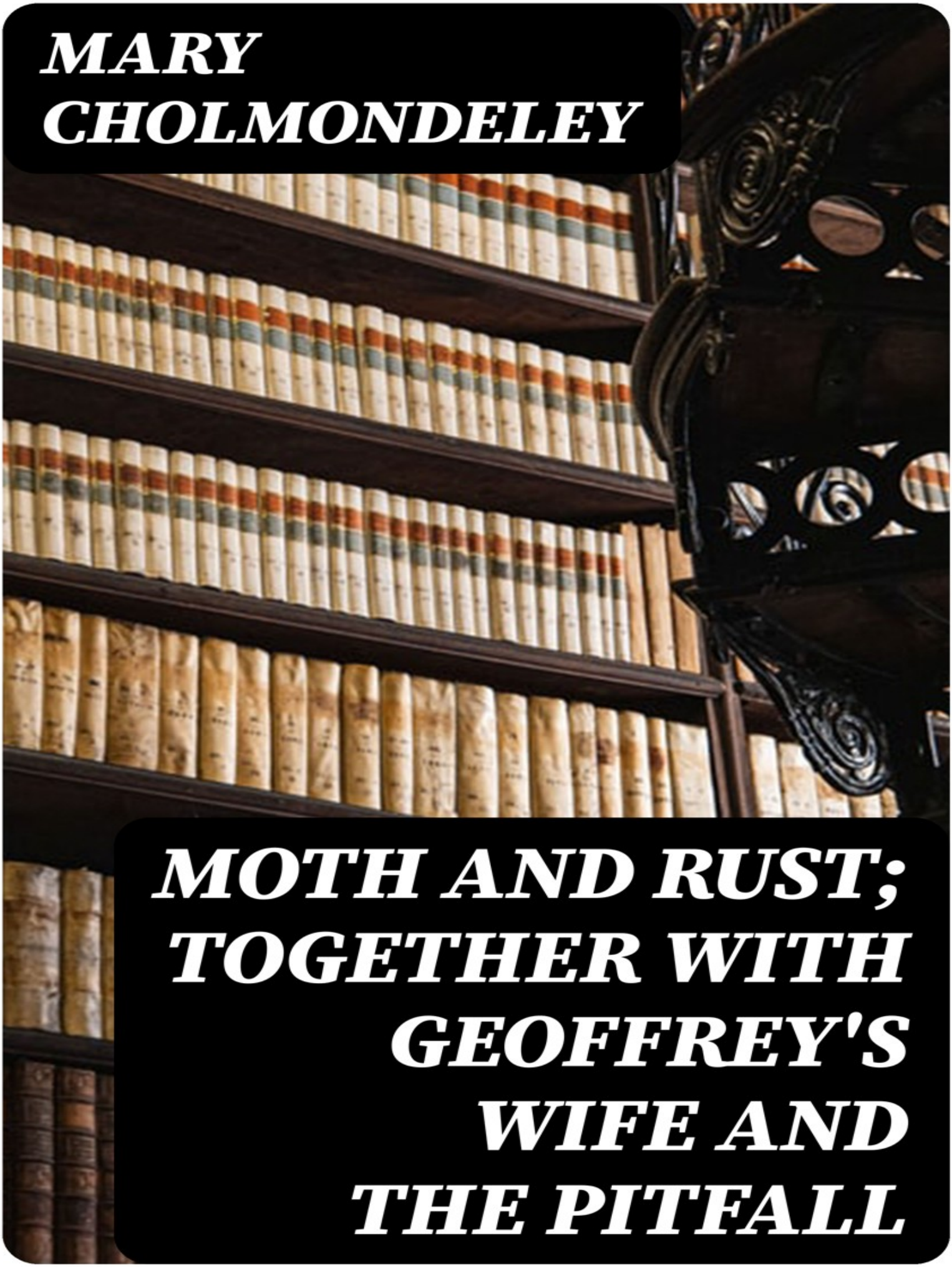

MARY CHOLMONDELEY

MOTH AND RUST; TOGETHER WITH GEOFFREY'S WIFE AND THE PITFALL

Mary Cholmondeley

Moth and Rust; Together with Geoffrey's Wife and The Pitfall

EAN 8596547356219

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

My best thanks are due to the Editor of *The Graphic* for his kind permission to republish "Geoffrey's Wife," which appeared originally in *The Graphic*.

MARY CHOLMONDELEY.

MOTH AND RUST

Table of Contents

MOTH AND RUST

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

> "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal."

The Vicar gave out the text, and proceeded to expound it. The little congregation settled down peacefully to listen. Except four of their number, the "quality" in the carved Easthope pew, none of them had much treasure on earth. Their treasure for the greater part consisted of a pig, that was certainly being "laid up" to meet the rent at Christmas. But there would hardly be time for moth and rust to get into it before its secluded life should migrate into flitches and pork pies. Not that the poorest of Mr Long's parishioners had any fear of such an event, for they never associated his sermons with anything to do with themselves, except on one occasion when the good man had preached earnestly against drunkenness, and a respectable widow had ceased to attend divine service in consequence, because, as she observed, she was not going to be spoken against like that by any one, be they who they may, after all the years she had been "on the teetotal."

Perhaps the two farmers who had driven over resplendent wives in dog-carts had treasure on earth. They certainly had money in the bank at Mudbury, for they were to be seen striding in in gaiters on market-day to draw it out. But then it was well known that thieves did not break

through into banks and steal. Banks sometimes broke of themselves, but not often.

On the whole, the congregation was at its ease. It felt that the text was well chosen, and that it applied exclusively to the four occupants of "the Squire's" pew.

The hard-worked Vicar certainly had no treasure on earth, if you excepted his principal possessions, namely, his pale wife and little flock of rosy children, and these, of course, were only encumbrances. Had they not proved to be so? For his cousin had promised him the family living, and would certainly have kept that promise when it became vacant, if the wife he had married in the interval had not held such strong views as to a celibate clergy.

The Vicar was a conscientious man, and the conscientious are seldom concise.

> "He held with all his tedious might,
> The mirror to the mind of God."

There was no doubt he was tedious, and it was to be hoped that the portion of the Divine mind not reflected in the clerical mirror would compensate somewhat for His more gloomy attributes as shown therein.

Mrs Trefusis, "Squire's" mother, an old woman with a thin, knotted face like worn-out elastic, sat erect throughout the service. She had the tight-lipped, bitter look of one who has coldly appropriated as her due all the good things of life, who has fiercely rebelled against every untoward event, and who now in old age offers a passive, impotent resistance to anything that suggests a change. She had had an easy,

comfortable existence, but her life had gone hard with her, and her face showed it.

Near her were the two guests who were staying at Easthope. The villagers looked at the two girls with deep interest. They had made up their minds that "the old lady had got 'em in to see if Squire could fancy one of 'em."

Lady Anne Varney, who sat next to Mrs Trefusis, was a graceful, small-headed woman of seven-and-twenty, delicately featured, pale, exquisitely dressed, with the indefinable air of a finished woman of the world, and with the reserved, disciplined manner of a woman accustomed to conceal her feelings from a world in which she has lived too much, in which she has been knocked about too much, and which has not gone too well with her. If Anne attended to the sermon—and she appeared to do so—she was the only person in the Easthope pew who did.

No; the other girl, Janet Black, was listening too now and then, catching disjointed sentences with no sense in them, as one hears a few shouted words in a high wind.

Ah me! Janet was beautiful. Even Mrs Trefusis was obliged to own it, though she did so grudgingly, and added bitterly that the girl had no breeding. It was true. Janet had none. But beauty rested upon her as it rests on a dove's neck, varying with every movement, every turn of the head. She was quite motionless now, her rather large, ill-gloved hands in her lap. Janet was a still woman. She had no nervous movements. She did not twine her muff-chain round her fingers as Anne did. Anne looked at her now and then, and wondered whether she—Anne—would have been

more successful in life if she had entered the arena armed with such beauty as Janet's.

There was a portrait of Janet in the Academy several years later, which has made her beauty known to the world. We have all seen that celebrated picture of the calm Madonna face, with the mark of suffering so plainly stamped upon the white brow and in the unfathomable eyes. But the young girl sitting in the Easthope pew hardly resembled, except in feature, the portrait that, later on, took the artistic world by storm. Janet was perhaps even more beautiful in this her first youth than her picture proved her afterwards to be; but the beauty was expressionless, opaque. The soul had not yet illumined the fair face. She looked what she was—a little dull, without a grain of imagination. Was it the dulness of want of ability, or only the dulness of an uneducated mind, of powers unused, still dormant?

Without her transcendent beauty she would have appeared uninteresting and commonplace.

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth."

The Vicar had a habit of repeating his text several times in the course of his sermon. Janet heard it the third time, and it forced the entrance of her mind.

Her treasure was certainly on earth. It consisted of the heavy, sleek-haired young man with the sunburnt complexion and the reddish moustache at the end of the pew—in short, "the Squire."

After a short and ardent courtship she had accepted him, and then she herself had been accepted, not without groans, by his family. The groans had not been audible, but

she was vaguely aware that she was not received with enthusiasm by the family of her hero, her wonderful fairy prince who had ridden into her life on a golden chestnut. George Trefusis was heavily built, but in Janet's eyes he was slender. His taciturn dulness was in her eyes a most dignified and becoming reserve. His inveterate unsociability proved to her—not that it needed proving—his mental superiority. She could not be surprised at the coldness of her reception as his betrothed, for she acutely felt her own great unworthiness of being the consort of this resplendent personage, who could have married any one. Why had he honoured her among all women?

The answer was sufficiently obvious to every one except herself. The fairy prince had fallen heavily in love with her beauty; so heavily that, after a secret but stubborn resistance, he had been vanquished by it. Marry her he must and would, whatever his mother might say. And she had said a good deal. She had not kept silence.

And now Janet was staying for the first time at Easthope, which was one day to be her home—the old Tudor house standing among its terraced gardens, which had belonged to a Trefusis since a Trefusis built it in Henry the Seventh's time.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

"On peut choisir ses amitiés, mais on subit l'amour."

—Princess Karadja.

After luncheon George offered to take Janet round the gardens. Janet looked timidly at Mrs Trefusis. She did not know whether she ought to accept or not. There might be etiquettes connected with afternoon walks of which she was not aware. For even since her arrival at Easthope yesterday it had been borne in upon her that there were many things of which she was not aware.

"Pray let my son show you the gardens," said Mrs Trefusis, with impatient formality. "The roses are in great beauty just now."

Janet went to put on her hat, and Mrs Trefusis lay down on the sofa in the drawing-room with a little groan. Anne sat down by her. The eyes of both women followed Janet's tall, magnificent figure as she joined George on the terrace.

"She dresses like a shop-girl," said Mrs Trefusis. "And what a hat! Exactly what one sees on the top of omnibuses."

Anne did not defend the hat. It was beyond defence. She supposed, with a tinge of compassion, what was indeed the case, that Janet had made a special pilgrimage to Mudbury to acquire it, in order the better to meet the eyes of her future mother-in-law.

All Anne said was, "Very respectable people go on the top of omnibuses nowadays."

"I am not saying anything against her respectability," said poor Mrs Trefusis. "Heaven knows if there had been anything against it I should have said so before now. It would have been my duty."

Anne smiled faintly. "A painful duty."

"I'm not so sure," said Mrs Trefusis grimly. She never posed before Anne, nor, for that matter, did any one else. "But from all I can make out this girl is a model of middle-class respectability. Yet she comes of a bad stock. One can't tell how she will turn out. What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh."

"There are worse things than middle-class respectability. George might have presented you with an actress with a past. Lord Lossiemouth married his daughter's maid last week."

"I don't know what I've done," said Mrs Trefusis, "that my only son should marry a pretty horse-breaker."

"I thought it was her brother who was a horse-breaker."

"So he is, and so is she. It was riding to hounds that my poor boy first met her."

"She rides magnificently. I saw her out cub-hunting last autumn, and asked who she was."

"Her brother is disreputable. He was mixed up with that case of drugging some horse or other. I forget about it, but I know it was disgraceful. He is quite an impossible person, but I suppose we shall have to know him now. The place will be overrun with her relations, whom I have avoided for years. Things like that always happen to me."

This was a favourite expression of Mrs Trefusis'. She invariably spoke as if a curse had hung over her since her birth.

"What does it matter who one knows?" said Anne.

Mrs Trefusis did not answer. The knots in her face moved a little. She knew what country life and country society were better than Anne. She had all her life lived in the upper of the two sets which may be found in every country neighbourhood. She did what she considered to be her duty by the secondary set, but she belonged by birth and by inclination to the upper class. It was at first with bewildered surprise, and later on with cold anger, that she observed that her only son, bone of her bone, very son of herself and her kind dead husband, showed a natural tendency to gravitate towards the second-rate among their neighbours.

Why did he do it? Why did he bring strange, loud-voiced, vulgar men to Easthope, the kind of men whom Mr Trefusis would not have tolerated? She might have known that her husband would die of pneumonia just when her son needed him most. She had not expected it, but she ought to have expected it. Did not everything in her lot go crooked, while the lives of all those around her went straight? What was the matter with her son, that he was more at ease with these undesirable companions than with the sons of his father's old friends? Why would he never accompany her on her annual pilgrimage to London?

George was one of those lethargic, vain men who say they hate London. Catch them going to London! Perhaps if efforts were made to catch them there, they might repair thither. But in London they are nobodies; consequently to

London they do not go. And the same man who eschews London will generally be found to gravitate in the country to a society in which he is the chief personage. It had been so with George. Fred Black, the disreputable horse-breaker, and his companions, had sedulously paid court to him. George, who had a deep-rooted love of horse-flesh, was often at Fred's training stables. There he met Janet, and fell in love with her, as did most of Fred's associates. But unlike them, George had withdrawn. He knew he should "do" for himself with "the county" if he married Janet. And he could not face his mother. So he sulked like a fish under the bank, half suspicious that he is being angled for. So ignorant of his fellow-creatures was George that there actually had been a moment when he suspected Janet of trying to "land him," and he did not think any the worse of her.

Then, after months of sullen indecision, he suddenly rushed upon his fate. That was a week ago.

Anne left her chair as Mrs Trefusis did not answer, and knelt down by the old woman.

"Dear Mrs Trefusis," she said, "the girl is a nice girl, innocent and good, and without a vestige of conceit."

"She has nothing to be conceited about that I can see."

"Oh! yes. She might be conceited about marrying George. It is an amazing match for her. And she might be conceited about her beauty. I should be if I had that face."

"My dear, you are twenty times as good-looking, because you look what you are—a lady. She looks what she is—a——" Something in Anne's steady eyes disconcerted Mrs Trefusis, and she did not finish the sentence. She twitched her hands restlessly, and then went on: "And she can't come into a

room. She sticks in the door. And she always calls you 'Lady Varney.' She hasn't called a girl a 'gurl' yet, but I know she will. I had thought my son's wife might make up to me a little for all I've gone through—might be a comfort to me—and then I am asked to put up with a vulgarian."

Anne went on in a level voice: "Janet is not in the least vulgar, because she is unpretentious. Middle-class she may be, and is: so was my grandmother; but vulgar she is not. And she is absolutely devoted to George. He is in love with her, but she really loves him."

"So she ought. He is making a great sacrifice for her, and, as I constantly tell him, one he will regret to his dying day."

"On the contrary, he is only sacrificing his own pride and yours to—himself. He is considering only himself. He is marrying only to please himself, not——" Anne hesitated —"not to please Janet."

"Now you are talking nonsense."

"Yes, I think I am. It felt like sense, but by the time I had put it into words, it turned into nonsense. The little things you notice in Janet's dress and manner can be mitigated, if she is willing to learn."

"She won't be," said Mrs Trefusis, with decision. "Because she is stupid. She will be offended directly she is spoken to. All stupid people are. Now come, Anne! Don't try and make black white. It doesn't help matters. You must admit the girl is stupid."

Anne's gentle, limpid eyes looked deprecatingly into the elder woman's hard, miserable ones.

"I am afraid she is," she said at last, and she coloured painfully.

"And obstinate."

"Are not stupid people always obstinate?"

"No," said Mrs Trefusis. "I am obstinate, but no one could call me stupid."

"It does not prevent stupid people being always obstinate, because obstinate people are not always stupid."

"You think me very obstinate, Anne?" There were tears in the stern old eyes.

"I think, dear, you have got to give way, and as you must, I want you to do it with a good grace, before you estrange George from you, and before that unsuspecting girl has found out that you loathe the marriage."

"If she were not as dense as a rhinoceros, she would see that now."

"How fortunate, in that case, that she is dense. It gives you a better chance with her. Make her like you. You can, you know. She is worth liking."

"All my life," said Mrs Trefusis, "be they who they may, I have hated stupid people."

"Oh! no. That is an hallucination. You don't hate George."

Mrs Trefusis shot a lightning glance at her companion, and then smiled grimly. "You are the only person who would dare to say such a thing to me."

"Besides," continued Anne meditatively, "is it so certain that Janet is stupid? She appears so because she is unformed, ignorant, and because she has never reflected, or been thrown with educated people. She has not come to herself. She will never learn anything by imagination or

perception, for she seems quite devoid of them. But I think she might learn by trouble or happiness, or both. She can feel. Strong feeling would be the turning-point with her, if she has sufficient ability to take advantage of it. Perhaps she has not, and happiness or trouble may leave her as they found her. But she gives me the impression that she *might* alter considerably if she were once thoroughly aroused."

"I can't rouse her. I was not sent into the world to rouse pretty horse-breakers."

If Anne was doubtful as to what Mrs Trefusis had been sent into this imperfect world for, she did not show it.

"I don't want you to rouse her. All I want is that you should be kind to her." Anne took Mrs Trefusis' ringed, claw-like hand between both hers. "I do want that very much."

"Well," said Mrs Trefusis, blinking her eyes, "I won't say I won't try. You can always get round me, Anne. Oh! my dear, dear child, if it might only have been you. But of course, just because I had set my heart upon it, I was not to have it. That has been my life from first to last. If I might only have had you. You think me a cross, bitter old woman, and so I am: God knows I have had enough to make me so. But I should not have been so to you."

"You never are so to me. But you see my affections are—is not that the correct expression?—engaged."

"But you are not."

"No. I am as free as air. That is where the difficulty comes in."

"Where is the creature now?"

"In Paris. The *World* chronicles his movements. That is why I take in the *World*. If he had been in London this week,

I should not—be here at this moment."

"I suppose he is enormously run after?"

"Oh yes! By others as well as by me; by tons of others younger and better looking than I am."

"Now, Anne, I am absolutely certain that you have never run a yard after him."

"I have never appeared to do so," said Anne, with her faint, enigmatical smile. "The proprieties have been observed. At least by me they have. But I have covered a good deal of ground, nevertheless."

"I don't know what he is made of."

"Well, he is made of money for one thing, and I have not a shilling. He knows that."

"He ought to be only too honoured by your being willing to think of him. In my young days a man of his class would not have had a chance."

"Millionaires get their chance nowadays."

"Then why doesn't he take it?"

"Because," said Anne, her lip quivering, "he thinks I like him for his money. He has got that firmly screwed into his head."

"As if a woman like you would do such a thing."

"Women extremely like me are doing such things all the time. How is he to know I am different?"

"He must be a fool."

"He does not look like one."

"No," said Mrs Trefusis meditatively, "I must own he does not. He has a bullet head. I saw him once at the Duchess of Dundee's last summer. He was pointed out to me as the biggest thing in millionaires since Barnato. But I must

confess he was the very last person in the world whom I should have thought you would have looked at—for himself, I mean."

"That is what he thinks."

"He is so very unattractive."

"He is an ugly, forbidding-looking man of forty," said Anne, who had become very pale.

"I should not go as far as that," said Mrs Trefusis, somewhat disconcerted.

"Oh! I can for you!" said Anne, her quiet eyes flashing. "He is all these things. He is exactly what I would rather not have married. And I think he knows that instinctively, poor man! But in spite of all that, in spite of everything that repels me, I know that we belong to each other. He did not choose to like me, or I to like him. I never had any choice in the matter. When I first saw him I recognised him. I had known him all my life. I had been waiting for him always without knowing it. I never really understood anything till he came. I did not fall in love with him; at least, not in the way I see others do, and as I once did myself years ago. I am not attracted towards him. I am him. And he is me. One can't fall in love with oneself. He is my other self. We are one. We may live painfully apart as we are doing now—he may marry some one else: but the fact remains the same."

Mrs Trefusis did not answer. Love is so rare that when we meet it we realise that we are on holy ground.

"You and he will marry some day," she said at last.

Her thoughts went back to her own youth, and its romantic love and marriage. There was no romance here as

she understood it, nothing but a grim reality. But it almost seemed as if love could go deeper without romance.

"I do not see how a misunderstanding can hold together between you."

"You forget mother," said Anne.

Mrs Trefusis had momentarily forgotten her closest friend, the Duchess of Quorn, that notorious match-making mother of a quartette of pretty, well-drilled daughters, all of whom were now advantageously married except Anne—the eldest. And if Anne was not at this moment wedded to George Trefusis it was not owing to want of zeal on the part of both mothers. Mrs Trefusis was irrevocably behind the scenes in Anne's family.

"Mother ought by nature to have been a man and a cricketer," said Anne, "instead of the mother of many daughters. She is 'game' to the last, she is a hard hitter, and she will run till she drops on the chance of any catch. But her bowling is her strong point. Young men have not a chance with her. Her style may not be dignified, but her eye is extraordinary. Harry Lestrange did his silly, panic-stricken best, but—he is married to Cecily now."

"Did he really try to get out of it?"

"He did. He liked Cecily a little; he had certainly flirted with her when she came in his way, but he never made the least effort to meet her, and he did not want to marry her."

"And Cecily?"

"Cecily did not dislike him. She was only nineteen, and she had—so she told me—always hoped for curly hair; and of course Harry's is quite straight, what little there is of it. She shed a few tears about that, but she did as she was

told. They are a nice-looking young couple. They write quite happily. I daresay it will do very well. But, you see, unfortunately, Harry was a friend of Mr Vanbrunt's, and I know Harry consulted him as to how to get out of it. Well, directly mother's attention was off Harry, she found out about Mr Vanbrunt; how I don't know, but she did. Poor mother! she has a heart somewhere. It is her sporting instincts which are too strong for her. When she found out, she came into my room and kissed me, and cried, and said love was everything, and what did looks matter, and, for her part, if a man was a good man, she thought it was of no importance if he had not had a father. Think of mother's saying that, after marrying poor father? But she was quite sincere. Mother never minds contradicting herself. There is nothing petty about her. She cried, and I cried too. We seemed to be nearer to each other than we had been for years. I was the last daughter left at home, and she actually said she did not want to part with me. I think she felt it just for the moment, for she had had a good deal of worry with some of the sons-in-law, especially Harry. But after a little bit she came to herself, and she gave me such advice. Oh, such advice! Some of it was excellent—that was the worst of it—but it was all from the standpoint of the woman stalking the man. And she asked me several gimlet questions about Mr Vanbrunt. She said I had not made any mistake so far, but that I must be very careful. She was like a tiger that has tasted blood. She said it was almost like marrying royalty—marrying such wealth as that. I believe he has a property in Africa rather larger than England. But she said that I was her dear child, and she thought it might be done. I implored her