

Mildred Pemberton
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From
The New Monthly Magazine, 1836
Volume 46

Compiled
by
Peter J. Bolton

MILDRED PEMBERTON.

I NEVER saw a girl for whom the epithet lovely seemed so completely suited as Mildred Pemberton: she was made up of all bright colours. Her lip was of the most vivid scarlet, her cheek of the warmest rose, her eyes of that violet blue so rarely seen except in a child, and her skin of a dazzling white, so transparent, that the azure veins in her temples seemed almost as blue as her eyes. Her hair curled naturally, and no poetical simile ever went beyond the truth of their brightness. Gold, sunshine, &c., were the only comparisons for those glossy ringlets. When she was two-and-twenty she scarcely looked sixteen, and her manners were as childish as her face and figure. She was guileless, enthusiastic, and sensitive; too ignorant in every way both of books and things perhaps to be called clever, but she had in herself all the materials for becoming so: with that quick perception which the imagination always gives, and the energy which is the groundwork of all excellence.

Sir Henry Pemberton, her father, was a severe man, and it was said that a young and beautiful wife had withered in the ungenial atmosphere of his cold stern temper. Only that Englishmen have a travelling mania, and the more comfortable they are at home, the less they can abide to stay there, no one could have accounted for Sir Henry's coming to Rome. He cared nothing for the fine arts. I doubt whether the finest music would have wrung from him more than Dr. Johnson's ejaculation, when the difficulty of some celebrated overture was dwelt upon, "Difficult!—I wish it were impossible." I never heard him make but one remark on painting, namely, "wonder that people should go to so much trouble and expense to have that on canvass, which they see better in the streets any day." For antiquities he had no taste, and society he positively disliked. His daughter, however, had his share of enjoyment and her own too—she was delighted with everything. The poetry of her nature was called forth by the poetical atmosphere of Rome. She had that peculiar organization, on which music has influence like "the enchanter's wand;" while Corinne and Chateaubriand had already excited all her sympathies for "the world of ashes at her feet." But, after seeing her at the Spanish ambassador's ball dancing with the young Count Arrezi, I was persuaded that the fair English girl was investing all things around her with that poetry which the heart flings over the commonplaces of life once "and once only."

A night or two afterwards (for we both lived in the Piazza di Spagna) I heard the chords of a guitar accompanying a song from "Metastasio;" I also heard a window unclose, and then came a few extempore stanzas in honour of a certain wreath of flowers which I took for granted were thrown into the street. Now a guitar, a cloak, moonlight, and a handsome cavalier, what nature—at least what feminine nature—could resist them? Accustomed to the seclusion of a country-seat, or the small coterie of a country town, where her taste, feeling, and fancy alike were dormant, the effect of Rome on Mildred Pemberton was like a sudden introduction into fairyland. Her eyes and senses were alike fascinated—she lived in a dream of realized poetry. Love

and youth are ever companions, and Mildred was no exception to the general rule. But hers was one of those natures which love affects the most intensely; it was, indeed,

“ The worship the heart lifts on high,
And the heavens reject not.”

For such love is the emanation of all that is most elevated and most unselfish in our nature. On this subject any general rule is impossible; love, like the chamelion, is coloured by the air in which it lives—and the finer the air the richer the colour. Some young ladies have a happy facility of falling in and out of love; their heart, like a raspberry tart, is covered with crosses. But Mildred was too sensitive and too ideal for these “light summer fancies.” Her affection was her destiny, and she loved the young Italian with the devotion and depth of a love that was half poetry. I never saw a handsomer couple—such perfect representatives of the north and south: she, fair as that sweetest of roses, the one called the maiden’s blush; and he of that rich dark olive, which suits so well with the high Roman features.

There are always plenty of people to talk of what does not concern them, and a love affair would seem to be everybody’s business; precisely because it is one of all others with which they have the least to do. At last the affair reached Sir Henry’s ears, and he was as furious as any father in a romance of four volumes; bread and water, and to be locked up for life, were among the least of his menaces. I believe that he thought himself merciful because they were the only ones that he actually inflicted. He was wrong, as all are who rouse the passive resistance of a woman’s nature. The indignity and violence with which she was treated only made her turn more fondly to the shelter of the loving heart she believed was so truly her own. Kindness might have brought her to her father’s feet, ready to give up her dearest hopes for his sake; but his harsh anger only made her tremble at the hopeless future. There was also another motive which strengthened her resolution, she had become secretly attached to the Catholic faith, and, like all young converts, was enthusiastic in her belief. Love might have something to do with the conversion. Sir Henry said that it had done all the mischief; but Mildred at all events believed, that even had the Count d’Arrezi been out of the question, her vocation would have been the same, still she felt happy in the idea of their mutual conviction.

Well, one moonlight night a closely-shrouded couple were seen gliding across the Piazza di Spagna. The fountain’s low and melancholy singing was the only sound, and the moon shone full on the magnificent flight of steps which led to the convent della Trinita de Monti. The stately domes shone like silver in the lovely night, and Mildred ascended the vast steps with the buoyant feet of hope as she gazed upon them. They pointed out her place of refuge, and she was conducted thither by Arrezi. Gradually as she ascended, the singing of the fountain died away in the distance, but a still sweeter song arose on the air. The nuns were at vespers, and the solemn chant pierced even the huge walls by which they were surrounded. Mildred clung to her lover’s arm as they paused before the gates; she started at the deep sound of the bell which announced their arrival—it struck like a knell on her heart. Her appearance was expected, and she was at once conducted to the Abbess; a tall, stately woman, but one whose sad brow and cheek worn before its

time, told that suffering and sorrow had preceded the quiet of the cloister.

It was with strange feelings that Mildred laid down on the little pallet appointed for her. The room was small and lofty, apparently partitioned off from one of larger size, for the height was quite disproportionate, and the walls were covered with huge frescos, containing passages from the Holy Scriptures; these were abruptly terminated by a dark, carved wainscoting, that stretched on one side. The apartment was singularly gloomy, and the subject of the fresco served anything but to relieve it—it represented the Murder of the Innocents. Not a horror was spared; here a pale, wild-looking woman struggled, but vainly, with the ruffian who could only reach her child through herself; another was flying, but the infant in her arms wore the livid hues of death. To the left a female, whose high and Jewish but handsome features were well suited to the expression of a Judith or a Jared—stood with her arm raised, and her mouth convulsed with the blending of agony and prophecy—apparently in the act of cursing; but the most touching figure of all was a woman kneeling by the bodies of two children, twisted in each other's arms and pierced by the same blow. There was such a fixed look of intense despair in the large tearless eyes, such a stupidity of horror in the set and rigid face—as if every consciousness was gone but that of horror; the eyes of Mildred were riveted upon it. The thought of how strong a parent's affection must be arose in her mind, and at that moment she reproached herself for leaving her father; then the terror of his anger, mingled with tenderness for her lover, combated her regret. "Oh! that my mother," -exclaimed she, throwing herself on the rude pallet below, "had lived to counsel and to love me!" And the image of that pale lady seated lonely in her dressing-room, to which she was confined for months before she died, hardened Mildred's heart against her father. She was a little creature of some six years old when Lady Pemberton died; but her wan and lovely countenance, her sweet sad voice, the tears that rose so often unbidden to her faint blue eyes, were to her child as things of yesterday.

At length she slept; but the tears were yet glittering on her long eyelashes when the first rosy gleams of day-break awakened her: she started with that half recollection which attends our first confused arousing—she wondered where she was—the events of the preceding night flashed upon her—she trembled as she thought of the irrevocable step she had taken. The cross was hung at the foot of her pallet, and she flung herself on her knees before it, and a more fervent and unselfish prayer never yet arose to that heaven, where alone is pity and pardon. Her devotions over, she approached the window, and the calm and lovely scene gave its own cheerfulness: the crimson blush of the daybreak was melting around the spires that gleamed on high, and long, soft shadows fell from the ilex and cypress, whose huge size attested the long seclusion of the convent garden. The distant murmur of the little fountain was only broken by the rustle of the birds amid the leaves, and the early chirp of the cicada in the long grass beneath: Mildred felt soothed and cheered, it is so impossible for youth to resist the influence of morning.

Sir Henry was wild with rage when he heard of his daughter's flight. He challenged the Count, who refused to meet the father of his future

wife. Next he bent all his efforts towards the recovery of Miss Pemberton; a direct application was made to the Pope, that forcible means might be used for her restoration: this was refused. Miss Pemberton was of age, and the church would not refuse its protection to one about to become a member of its flock.

On receiving this answer, Sir Henry made immediate preparation for leaving Rome; but the morning of his departure he sent for the Count Arzei. The lover obeyed the summons, supposing that it was some overture to a reconciliation; on his arrival he found Sir Henry pale with suppressed rage, and pacing the hall, at whose entrance the travelling carriage was waiting. Arzei was somewhat staggered to perceive these signs of actual departure; however, he entered, and was received by his intended father-in-law with a polite bow.

"I have many apologies to make," said the Baronet, with a manner studiously courteous, "for giving you this trouble—but I wished to send by you a message to Miss Pemberton. You understand English, I believe, or my servant can interpret for me?"

"I understand *ver vel*," said the Count; "shall be too happy to take von message."

"Well then, Sir," continued his companion, "you will inform Miss Pemberton that she is entitled to one hundred a-year left her by her aunt, and that this will be punctually paid in to Torloni's; beyond this she is not to expect a shilling from me. I leave Rome to-day; I will never see her again—never permit her name to be mentioned in my presence. My property will go to my nephew—and all I shall ever leave her will be my curse." So saying, Sir Henry passed the Italian with a low bow, and entered his carriage.

"Holy saints!" exclaimed the Count in Italian, catching hold of the servant's arm, "he cannot mean what he says?"

"If you knew Sir Henry as well as I do," replied the man, "you would not doubt it," and he hurried after his master.

The Count stood as if the carriage had been Medusa's head—"A hundred a-year!" muttered he; "why, my mustachios are well worth that!"

He returned to his house, smoked two cigars, and then repairing to the Convent della Trinita, requested to see the Abbess. "Madam," said he, as soon as the stately superior had taken her seat in the large arm-chair, "there are some unpleasant affairs which are best settled through the intervention of a third person. Will you inform Miss Pemberton that I have seen Sir Henry this morning, who has left Rome, and that he desires me to let her know that the hundred a-year which she inherits will be punctually paid in to Torloni's; but that from himself she never must expect a shilling: he will leave her nothing but his curse. To that," continued the Count, with his most melo-dramatic air, "I will not expose her; I sacrifice myself, and leave Rome to-night. Will you tell her this, and spare both the unutterable agony of farewell?"

"You will excuse my undertaking any such mission," replied the superior, fixing on him her dark and flashing eyes, beneath whose scorn Arzei felt himself quail for the moment; "you will say what you think proper to the English signora yourself." So saying she rang the silver bell on the table beside, whose summons was instantly obeyed by a novice, and Miss Pemberton's presence was requested in the parlour.

The Abbess averted her face and took up her beads, and the Count was left standing by the window to arrange the coming conversation as best he might. A light step was soon heard, and Mildred Pemberton came in, looking lovelier in the simple conventual garb than ever she had done with all the aids of dress; the folds only fastened in at the waist, suited her childish figure. The pure white of the veil was scarcely to be discerned from the pure white of the skin; the single braid of gold on either side her forehead betrayed how rich the hair was that lay concealed—and the small features gave something of the innocence of infancy to her face; a bright blush crimsoned her face as she entered, too shy to extend the little hand to her lover which trembled at her side.

“My angel,” said the Count, dropping on one knee, “I have seen your father this morning.” Mildred turned deadly pale. “Do not fear—I will give up everything, even yourself, rather than make you wretched. He has threatened our union with his curse. Thus I prevent its falling on you, Mildred—I renounce all claim upon you—I will leave Rome to-night.”

Mildred stood white and speechless. A woman whose lover resigns her, and as if for her own sake, though without consulting her, is placed in a most awkward situation. What can she do? Take him at his word? That is easy to say, but hard to do, when all the hopes and affections are garnered in his love. The Superior saw her painful position, and addressed the gentleman.

“You have forgotten to mention, Count Arzezi, that Miss Pemberton will in future receive only the hundred a-year that she inherits from her aunt.”

The colour came back to Mildred’s cheek and lips; she sought to meet her lover’s eye, but it avoided her own. With a woman’s quick instinct, where the feelings are concerned, she saw his motives. With a degree of dignity of which her slight form had scarcely seemed capable, she turned calmly to the Abbess, and said,

“Have I your permission that the Count Arzezi will leave us together? It seems to me unnecessary to prolong our last interview.”

The Count approached, and began some hurried sentences of good wishes, devotion, sacrifice of his own happiness, &c.; but she interrupted him almost sternly—

“I have but one favour to ask, which is, that you will leave me, and at once.”

Glad to have been released on such easy terms, for he had expected prayers, tears, and reproaches, Arzezi instantly obeyed. The door closed after him, and Mildred dropped senseless on the floor. The Abbess called for no assistance, she pitied the agony of the moment too much, to let it be observed. She raised the youthful sufferer in her arms, and bathed her face with essence, and when Mildred recovered, her head rested on the shoulder of the Superior, who was watching her with the tenderness of a mother. “These are the trials, my child, which make us turn to heaven. The holy Madonna keep you!” This was her only remark, and Mildred went to her cell.

It was fortunate for her that her health gave way beneath so much excitement—the body sometimes saves the mind. Next day she was too ill to move, and it was weeks before the fever left her. Of all things time can the least be measured by space. Years, or the effects

of years, had passed over the head of Mildred, before she rose from that couch of sickness. She left there the rose of her cheek, the light of her eye—

“ Her lip still wore the sweetness of a smile,
But not its gaiety.”

The buoyancy of her step, her sweet singing laugh, were gone for ever, —she had lived past youth and hope. Some one has truly said—

“ ’Tis not the lover which is lost,
The love for which we grieve,
It is the price that they have cost,
The memories which they leave.”

This was the case with Mildred—she despised Arrezi too thoroughly to regret him—she deeply felt how unworthy he was of her deep-devoted affection. Always accustomed to wealth, she did not understand its value; we must want money to really know its worth, and money seemed to her the vilest consideration that could have influence. She thought with astonishment on the duplicity of the Count. Inconstancy she could have forgiven; that would have come within the limits of her poetical experience. She had been capable of any personal sacrifice to secure his happiness, even with a rival; but to be left so unhesitatingly the moment that she had no longer the prospect of wealth, showed too plainly what his object had been from the first—all his enthusiasm, all his romance, had been mere acting. She shrank away from a world in which there was such deceit. To what could she trust whose confidence had been so betrayed? Mildred Pemberton had laid down on the pallet of her secluded cell a girl full of the confidence, the generous impulses, the warm affections of girlhood; she rose from it a grave and thoughtful woman. She had ceased to look forward, she wished for nothing but quiet, she hoped, but only in heaven. All the poetry of her imaginative temperament flung back violently upon herself, served only to strengthen the influence of her new creed. Beloved by all, the earnestness of her devotion made her thought almost a saint by some; and the sweet, strange accents of the English novice, blending in the hymns of the saintly choir, gave a new fervour to religious exaltation. She entered upon the duties of her new state with zeal, and in their performance, and the thousand chains of daily habit, sought forgetfulness of the past. Still it was hard to forget her native tongue, and her native land. Separated from her father, his harshness was forgotten, and she only remembered the ties that united them.

She had been in the convent nearly a twelvemonth, and the time for the final vows was rapidly approaching, when one day to her astonishment she heard an English voice in the garden, and saw the fair face of one of her own countrywomen. She soon became acquainted with Emily Pemberton, and found that she was her cousin, though from a family disagreement they had never met. Mildred was mistaken in supposing that she was dead to all sense of affection, for her heart warmed at once to her young relative. It was some time before she found courage to speak of the past, and at last she asked about her father.

“ He is quite broken by his last illness; pale, emaciated, he is but the shadow of what he was. It is a melancholy thing to see him wander through the dull rooms of the old hall, as if haunted by the memory of those who had once been there.”

This conversation sunk deep into Mildred's mind, though at the time she could not trust her voice to answer. Again and again it was renewed; at last Mildred hazarded the question—

“Do you think my father would see me?”

“I am sure he would,” exclaimed Emily; “it is only pride that prevents him seeking you. But should not that be your part?—you would not have a parent humble himself to his child?”

Before they parted that evening, it was settled that Mildred should accompany her cousin the following week, whither she was returning under the protection of her brother. The fact was, that the moment Sir Henry arrived in England he had sent for his nephew, executed a will in his favour, and was then seized with a violent illness, which truly had left him an altered man. He remembered his harshness to his wife and child now they were both removed from him. He missed Mildred more than he would have owned even to himself. Charles, his nephew, saw all this: from the first announcement of his uncle's intentions he had resolved not to profit by them, and the sight of his drooping spirits confirmed him in a plan he had formed. His sister entered into it with all the romance of youth, and off they set to Rome together, and, as we have narrated, carried their project into effect.

The next morning Mildred requested an audience of the abbess, whose kindness to her from the morning Count Arzezi left the parlour had never known change. She explained to her all her thoughts and feelings; her misery at fancying her father desolate in his old age, and her conviction that she ought to seek his pardon. “If he reject me, I return to your feet, my mother!”

The superior for an instant yielded to the weakness of humanity; tears stood in her eyes, and her stately head rested for a moment on Mildred; but the motion was soon subdued, and the voice was almost as steady as usual, as she said, “Go, my beloved child; your duty to your sick and solitary parent is paramount to every other; in fulfilling that you best fulfil your duty to your God. Go; but if the world again repeat its bitter lessons, and you shrink from a burden too heavy to bear, remember, while I live you have a home in the Convent della Trinita.”

Mildred bathed the hand pressed to hers with her tears; they were the truest thanks.

A week more saw the cousins on the road to England, which they traversed with all possible rapidity; and with a throbbing heart Mildred found herself in the Park which she had quitted so many months ago, and yet it seemed like yesterday, for not a sign of change appeared. The sun was sinking over the avenue of old oaks; the lake was reddening with the glow; the long shadows rested on the grass, while in the distance they mingled in undefined obscurity. The deer were gathered together beneath the trees, and a large dog-rose bush was in the full luxuriance of its faint and fragile flower.

Charles Pemberton and his sister went forward to prepare Sir Henry, but after a few moments Mildred's anxiety became uncontrollable. Gradually she approached the house; she ascended the terrace, and, once there, thought that she might safely enter. There was a little room which opened upon it—it had once been her own favourite chamber, for it contained a picture of her mother, with herself, then a little creature

of two years old, in her hand. As she approached she heard voices, but the turn in the wall, for it was a corner room, completely concealed her. She stood, not daring to breathe, amid the long tendrils of the honeysuckle. She could not be mistaken—it was her father's voice and she heard him say, "Charles, I own the weakness—I do pine to see my child."

The next moment Mildred was at his feet. She found him much changed; illness had subdued his iron strength. He was lonely and dependent, and he now acknowledged the need of that affection which hitherto he had repelled. He soon could scarcely bear his daughter out of his sight, and she watched his every look. Sir Henry, almost confined to the house, driven about in a pony-chaise, was a happier man than he had ever been. One only subject of anxiety remained—he had openly made his nephew his heir, and he now saw the prior claim of his own child. They were gathered one summer evening in the little parlour, which still continued their favourite room, when Sir Henry introduced the subject. "It does not need," exclaimed the cousins, in a breath.

But Charles had yet more to say; he told Mildred that he loved her, and implored her father to give her hand, as of far more value than all the wealth that he could bequeath. Mildred allowed her hand to rest in his; but even the lover could draw no encouragement from the action. She was calm, but very pale—and her kindness was only kindness. "Charles," said she, looking on with the gentle affection of a sister, "I have loved once—however unworthily, I can never love again. I returned not to the world, but to my home—I am God and my father's!"

Charles gazed earnestly on the sweet eyes that sank not beneath his own. He saw that hope was out of the question, and pressing the hand which he relinquished, would have left the room; but detaining him, she turned to her father, and said, "He is my brother, is he not?"

"It shall be as you wish, Mildred," replied Sir Henry, "though I had hoped otherwise."

Charles soon after left them for a gay season in London, and where he formed an attachment to the beautiful but portionless orphan of an officer who had been killed in the Peninsula; it was Mildred who reconciled Sir Henry to the match. The young couple took up their residence at Pemberton House, and Mildred was to them as a sister.

At Sir Henry's death it was found that he had bequeathed his whole property to his nephew, with only a sufficient annuity to his daughter, and a little cottage which she had had built in the park. This was close to her cousins, without the strict retirement in which she lived being any check upon them. She never married, but passed her life in acts of kindness. Her place was by the sick bed, or with the afflicted,—the soother of every sorrow, the friend in every trouble. The children, who were fast growing up in the old Hall, adored her; and when, in after days, they passed her portrait in the gallery, it was with the same remark—"If ever there was an angel on earth it was my cousin Mildred!"

L. E. L.
