Riddles of Love

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With the illustrations of
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SpringStreet Books
Philadelphia

www.springstreetbooks.com

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Of Captain Pemberton and his daughter and their position in Shuttleton society.

 oo much praise can scarcely be given to those who visit the sick, seeing what a trouble most of us find it to visit the healthy. May Pemberton not only underwent the severer test of the two, but performed a thousand kind acts for the poor of the neighbourhood, to whom she was a more practical friend than you would consider possible in a Lady Bountiful of such very limited means. Other ladies, who were as bent upon being benevolent with far superior resources, found it impossible to keep pace with her. For a good genius seemed to follow May wherever she went in her ministrations. Her sick people always became sound, and her merely poor people mostly managed to tide over their troubles—getting work in the worst seasons, and paying up landlords who would not wait any longer, and bakers who said that not another loaf should they have—in a most miraculous manner. As for any school that she took in hand, the children simply became, in the course of a month, as near an approach to angels as can be achieved by cleanliness of faces and hands, the opportune employment of the pocket-handkerchief, and extraordinary attention to the preliminary paths of education. The ladies who did not succeed so well said it was her luck—in words at least to that effect—and so I suppose it was, though what luck may really be is a separate question which I will not here venture to discuss.

Doing good, as you may gather from the above, was fashionable in Shuttleton at the time to which I refer—only a few years back—and really there was quite room for any good that it was possible to do. For Shuttleton belonged to a manufacturing district, and the staple of the particular industry got scarce at times, and then employment got scarce, and the "hands" considered themselves fortunate if they could so far keep their feet as to become scarce also, and plentiful somewhere else. The aristocracy of the place—principally belonging to the manufacturing interest—had not always been careful in looking after popular wants. There had been a run in favour of frivolity and heartlessness a few years before;

for new aristocracies are wonderfully like the old in their defects, except that they seldom manage to misconduct themselves so well—their improprieties being usually wanting in that grace and flower which comes from the hereditary habit of doing as one pleases.

There had been for many years past a regiment quartered close to the town—generally of dragoons, whose utility in preference to infantry at times when distress takes an embarrassing form, is well appreciated by mayors and magistrates. The officers had naturally personal advantages over most of the local people; and although elderly gentlemen among the latter who had "made themselves" (out of ragged boys) professed to look down upon their military neighbours as weak in character and not always strong in cash, the latter had, of course, plenty of allies among the other sex, and were simply spoiled. The younger manufacturing interest, too, who had not made themselves, but found themselves ready made, were also favourably inclined to the officers, whose acquaintance they cultivated with a warmth which was a forcing process certainly—but then the plant was an exotic. The consequences were a few scandals, in which the military may have been most to blame, but the manufacturers were certainly most disgraced; so for some years the garrison was cut by the more discreet—of course the majority—of the townspeople, and serious benevolence came into fashion, as we have seen.

Not that May Pemberton merely followed the fashion. The scandals had occurred long before her father had settled in the neighbourhood, and in doing good she simply obeyed the first instinct of her nature. Her father was a captain in a foot regiment, who had lost his money, could not win his promotion, and so had gone upon half-pay. And being old for his rank—at any rate among the new generation of his comrades in arms—as well as delicate in health, he might fairly be considered as laid upon the shelf. He was a man saddened, too, by domestic troubles, though nobody quite knew what they were; but it was said that he had been separated from his wife some years before the supposed death of that lady.

Captain Pemberton's half-pay must have been more than usually expansive if he had nothing of his own to add to it; for the captain managed to live respectably enough—in an old house a short distance from the town, somewhat dilapidated, like himself, and with the remains of something better about it, like himself also. But as he did not entertain

his neighbours, and could not be considered a rising man, he did not meet with much attention from the society proper of the place, who recognized his daughter rather on the common ground of doing good, than in the light of a private friend. Among the country people—had Captain Pemberton gone among them—his status as an officer and a man of family would have insured recognition. But the good people of Shuttleton had no notion of a military man who did not belong to an actual regiment, and who was not to be seen at least sometimes with his sword under his arm or clattering aggressively on the pavement, who would not attend their private dinner parties in his shell-jacket, and their public balls in the glitter of his full dress. Above all, they did not believe in a military man who, being without a wife, was not on the cards to marry one of their daughters. For I should explain that at the period at which I write the garrison was fast being forgiven for its former faults, and even the good works in vogue were not considered incompatible with pleasant and advantageous society. There were two reasons, I take it, for the change: time in the first place, and in the second place the substitution for a cavalry regiment of a battalion of infantry. All officers are wicked in the eyes of respectable people of the Shuttleton stamp, but infantry officers are somehow not considered so wicked as cavalry officers. Why it is, I know not, since a horse cannot be supposed to demoralize his master; but at any rate the Shuttletonians seemed to look upon the change as an occasion for compromise, and at the time to which I refer were burying the hatchet of strife and covering it up with the earth of oblivion.

The new feeling, however, did not much concern the captain. He was quite a match for the Shuttletonians in point of pride. Although he received a certain share of the local civilities, he availed himself very sparely of the amnesty accorded to his class. He was a saddened man, as I have said, and moreover he had views of his own, which were rather old-fashioned, about grades of society, and remembered that in his day, when he was a man of the *mode*, that people like the Shuttletonians were not received in his circles. So, beyond the range of the officers of the local regiment, he saw very little society; and his daughter, you may be sure, saw less. For women feel the embarrassment of a false position more than men, if only in the matter of milliner's bills—compared with which those of tailors

Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine;

—and ladies, although they may have dozens of dresses in which they look respectively lovely, have never the precise dress required for appearance upon any particular occasion.

2

An important addition to Shuttleton society.

You have heard so much about May Pemberton and her father that it is quite time you made their personal acquaintance. Here is an excellent opportunity, while they are seated at breakfast in a little room opening upon a large garden, and discussing the contents of a letter which has just been received by post. As there are no other persons present you may easily distinguish between the two. The young lady so perfectly but plainly dressed in the freshest of morning muslin, with the abundant chestnut hair, deep blue eyes, and the clearest possible complexion, is of course May. The gentleman of middle age, with hair inclining to grey, aquiline profile, and soft, somewhat sad, smile, is of course Captain Pemberton.

The letter under discussion is written in one of those unmistakeably ladylike hands which seem made up of spiders' legs. It is evidently addressed to May, who is reading it with her face lit up with mingled interest and amusement, and making her comments upon it as she proceeds.

"Lucy is just as careless as ever," she remarked, referring to her correspondent. "Her letter is dated last week, but does not seem to have been posted until just before she was to leave Cheltenham; so unless she has changed her plans in the meantime, she will be here to-day. However, unless her extra year at Minerva House has made her a very different person from what she was when I was there, I need not expect her until she makes her appearance."

May made this little hit at her old schoolfellow in the purest good nature; but she was not justified in her anticipations of delay, for while she was speaking wheels were heard on the private road which led to the

house, a wagonette stopped at the gate, out of which leapt a young lady, evidently in an unrestrainable state of animal spirits, who, pushing past the timid servant with a hasty "Oh! say Miss Cartwright," dashed at once into the house and announced herself.

May and her friend had an embrace of no ordinary character, and it was only after at least two minutes and a half of intense rapture that the visitor perceived the presence of a third person. She was then abashed for the space of about half a minute, after which she was in excellent form for the inevitable introduction to Captain Pemberton. Three minutes after she was talking to that gentleman as if she had known him for twenty years.

"You know all about me from May, of course," she said, after a great deal of irrelevant matter. "We were such friends, you know, at Minerva House, and we mean to be such friends always, don't we, dear?"

Here came another embrace of May, and Miss Cartwright's feelings seemed so overflowing that the captain thought his turn was certainly coming next. And with very little encouragement on his part, I really think it would.

"You know, of course, that they have made papa mayor," continued the young lady, who monopolized almost the entire conversation, and talked with an irrelevance as to subject matter for which she seemed to have an especial talent. "Oh! yes, that was six months ago. But isn't it nice? And mamma is mayoress, of course. She is so proud, and in such an awful rage with papa when he talks in his old way of when he came into Shuttleton without any hat, and no boots to speak of, and only three halfpence in his pocket. As if there was anything remarkable in that. All the people who come into places with only three halfpence in their pockets always make large fortunes. It must be something in the three halfpence, I suppose. The unfortunate people who have twopence or threepence never get on. But you would be so amused to hear papa on the subject, now he is mayor—only you have heard him, of course, for the last six months."

The Pembertons were not very familiar with this weakness on the part of Mr. Cartwright, who, as the reader will gather from the above, was one of the "self-made men" of Shuttleton, having, from the position of a "hand" in a cotton mill, become one of the largest proprietors in the place; but they laughed at the picture given by the young lady of her honoured parent, and could not choose but be almost as hilarious as herself.

"Yes, I arrived last night," pursued Miss Cartwright—I may as well call her Lucy at once—apropos of nothing; "and of course dashed over to see my dear friend immediately" (here came another embrace of May and another unrealized expectation on the part of her father)—"and what are we going to do? It is still absurdly early, only half-past ten o'clock." (The latter assertion was made on the authority of a lovely little watch which, after putting to its proper use, the speaker twisted round her finger carelessly, by means of the chain which she held in her hand, winding it close, and then unwinding it by a contrary action, with the utmost contempt for its interior economy.) "In the first place, though, I must go home, for it will not do to leave papa and mamma; so you will come, May dear, and spend the day with me; and you—"(she hesitated in addressing Captain Pemberton, not in any embarrassment, but with an air which gave you the idea that she did not know whether to call him Tom, Dick, or Harry)—"and you, you will come and spend the day also."

Captain Pemberton laughed at the idea of his going to spend the day with his interesting young friend, and pleaded a prior engagement, with as much gaiety as he could command. He had promised, he said, to take lunch at the mess, and he was afraid that he would be wanted for whist in the afternoon.

"Well, perhaps we shall be better without you, after all," said the young lady, who, like a great many good-natured persons, had a wonderful faculty for consoling herself for the absence of friends; "for I want to talk to May about the great ball which papa is giving at the Town Hall—you have had the cards, of course—and to get her advice as to what I'm to wear. It's very difficult to get ball-dresses on short notice."

The captain gravely assented, and thought he remembered instances in which it had been difficult to get those indispensable articles even on long notice. But he did not make unpleasant remarks.

The end of this important meeting was that May was taken possession of, placed in the wagonette, and became the personal property of her affectionate but dictatorial friend for the rest of the day.

3

A still more important addition to Shuttleton society.

There was no peace in Shuttleton from the day of Lucy's arrival, that is to say, to the extent of that young lady's influence upon the society of the place, and it was not her fault if that influence was wanting in any way. May was very fond of her friend; but impulsive people just arrived from distant and facetious places make sad havoc with your ordinary arrangements, and May was allowed no time to attend to her duties either in doors or out. Her father fortunately was not exacting, and liked to see his daughter amused; but May had an idea that he was helpless in her absence, and would perish miserably if left to his own resources for any unusual period. Then there was the sick people and the poor people upon whom she bestowed her ministrations. What would become of them if she were continually made to go out in that eternal wagonette upon prodigal missions to shops and vivacious visits to private houses filled with persons whom she knew nothing about?

Lucy took a practical view of her objections. As for the sick, the best thing to do for them, in her opinion, was to send them a doctor; and as for the poor, the best thing to do for them was to send them money, of course. And as far as concerned the latter sinew of war it was at May's disposal. But Lucy insisted that she must not be troubled about its bestowal. She did not care who had it, in fact, but there it was if it was wanted. This was not quite in accordance with May's idea of doing good, for she had not arrived at the point of some charitable ladies, who lay their indifferent friends under contribution for all kinds of philanthropy without remorse. But she bore up against the invasion with all the grace at her command, and did good by stealth without any chance of blushing to find it fame. She was not altogether uninfluenced, too, by the strong demonstrations of her determined friend, her own strength being—as we shall see in the course of our narrative—of a different kind, and all the more potential for being restrainable. As Lucy remarked in the course of some minor combats between them, in which Miss May gained the advantage without seeming to do so, "There is no knowing how to take these quiet

people—they do just as they please with one, and one is a mere puppet in their hands." Miss Lucy was so accustomed to pull the strings at home, and place her papa in any position she pleased, that the smallest hitch in the machinery out of doors seemed to be quite unnatural, and a thing to be resented. How they managed her at Minerva House I am not in a position to say; but if all the other young ladies resembled her in despotic ideas of independence, that respectable establishment must have been in a chronic state of siege.

One day—two days after her arrival—she came over to the Pembertons, in the eternal wagonette, with an idea about the impending ball—something connected with a special quadrille in which she wished May to take a part—and after having developed her views with characteristic ardour, took her friend away to put the project in train. This important business involved a great deal of going about to shops, and then the two young ladies went to lunch at the mayor's house, a large bleak-looking mansion, painfully new and clean, situated in a square equally new and clean, and apparently the scene of an active competition among the residents as to who should have the whitest steps and the brightest knockers.

When the young ladies entered the hall the servant told Lucy that there were some gentlemen in the drawing-room. Lucy, who took an abstract interest in the sex, eagerly inquired their names. She was told "Mr. Richard Hargrave and a strange gentleman he had brought with him—a very grand-looking gentleman," added the girl.

Mr. Cartwright, by the way, was quite rich enough to have his hall-door opened by a couple of powdered footmen; but those ornamental accessories do not seem to flourish in manufacturing towns.

The information about the visitors was quite sufficient to hasten Lucy's steps upstairs, and May somewhat reluctantly accompanied her.

The gentlemen were being very laboriously entertained by Mrs. Cartwright, a not uncomely person, of comfortable dimensions, and general appearance and manner of the kind called homely. She had married Mr. Cartwright when he was a poor man, and her own condition was that of a poor girl; so that she had never enjoyed the advantage of an education at Minerva House, and took views of the world and of society altogether different from those of her daughter. It was a great relief to her when that young lady appeared, for although Mrs. Cartwright was at ease with Mr.

Hargrave, she did not feel what she called "equal" to keeping up a conversation with the "grand-looking gentleman."

And at this crisis, I am sorry to say, Lucy suffered a collapse, and was covered with unnecessary confusion; for her demonstrativeness was, after all, only of a spasmodic kind, liable to sudden checks, and without any reserve of composure. It was strong with people with whom she fancied she had a right to be familiar, and she was quite assured, as we have seen, on first meeting with Captain Pemberton. But he was May's father, and a middle-aged man, and she had an idea, common to persons of her kind while they are young, that middle-aged persons are of no account, and old persons, for the stronger reason, mere encumbrances, to be treated with more or less contempt. She had been for two years at Minerva House, and been taught a great many accomplishments; but her education, as you may see, had been neglected.

So it was that the presence of the stranger threw her into confusion; and from being her own frank and particularly free self, she suddenly became such a mass of affectation that, in a person of less natural attractions, would have been simply disgusting. It was by no means becoming, even to Lucy, whose attractions were of a healthy, happy order, and were nothing if not natural. For her little eyes were almost too bright to be expressive, her little mouth could not be made to mean anything but mirth, and she had no nose to speak of, and no chance therefore of gaining dignity in that department. She was, in fact, a pretty little, plump, laughing girl, and so long as she had courage to be that and nothing more, she was charming to a great many people; but when she lost her presence of mind she retreated into airs and graces, which made her mincing, feeble, and wearisome. For affectation which is successful and affectation which is unsuccessful are two different things. A woman who can act may do a great deal of execution in that way; but a woman who can't is lost whenever she ventures to play a part which is not her own.

It was for this reason, I suppose, that Lucy did not seem to make much impression upon the stranger, who was introduced as Captain Halidame, and proved to be a light dragoon on leave from his regiment in India, who was supposed to have designs on Shuttleton society in the way of a wife. His beauty, judged by a regular standard, was open to question; but he had, as May thought, and Lucy afterwards said, a very distinguished air,

justifying, indeed, the description of the domestic, who, by the way, during the whole of his visit, was loud in her praises, among her colleagues, of his lovely moustache and general appearance, and seemed to consider him in the light of a military angel.

Without committing themselves to quite so extreme an opinion as this, both Lucy and May were far from insensible to the attractions of their new acquaintance, who, besides being a very favourable version of the conventional style of dragoon as regarded his general "form," had an ease of deportment quite beyond acquirement, a confidential—almost caressing—manner, a rich, soft voice, and a pair of clear grey eyes, which, well employed as they were, gave an air of sincerity to everything he said. Beside Cecil Halidame, the friend by whom he had been presented, Lucy thought, looked positively vulgar. Yet Mr. Richard Hargrave was a notability in Shuttleton—called Beau Hargrave, in consequence of his fashionable pretensions—and hitherto regarded by Lucy as the finest gentleman she had ever seen. He was one of the representative men of Young Shuttleton—one of the large and growing class who, beginning life under far more easy conditions than their fathers, attend as little as possible to business and as much as possible to society, the main object of their ambition being to push themselves among the county people, and attach themselves in their diversions to the officers of the garrison. Such was the proud position of Mr. Richard Hargrave—a sandy, sanguine, cheerful, assured gentleman, with "educated whisker," a tendency to light blue in the matter of cravats, and a style of dressing generally which would have been more "swell" if it had been less "smart," and if his clothes had not always looked as if they had just come home from the tailor's.

But Mr. Hargrave might have appeared upon that occasion in the costume of a scarecrow for all the attention given to his appearance by the ladies. I am quite aware that these interesting persons ought not, and are supposed not, to look upon any men with admiration unless they are, or are going to be, their husbands. But I am afraid these conditions are not always complied with; and even May Pemberton—who even from the glimpse of her that has yet been obtained, you may see to be more likely than most people to be perfect in this as in other respects—could not escape being influenced by Cecil Halidame's powers of pleasing; and of these there had been a conspiracy to make him conscious in every society

that he had known for the past fifteen years. For this pleasant person was not quite young. He looked thirty, and might be five years older; and the experience required by a man who makes being pleasant his business in life, and has personal advantages to assist the object, gains him a great deal more in influence than he loses in years.

Poor Lucy was, as we have seen, quite overthrown by this charming presence, lost herself, and could not choose but take refuge in the most abject form of finnikin affectation. During the half hour that the visitors stayed she did nothing but make the most artificial, vapid remarks, upon subjects that she knew nothing about; confused persons and things through sheer absence of mind; and at times talked utter nonsense, to the astonishment of Mr. Hargrave and May, who were accustomed to her in her natural, unembarrassed, and ultra-demonstrative state of mind. The suavity of Captain Halidame, always great, was taxed sorely to muster up attention to and apparent interest in her feeble flow of small talk; and, altogether, I fancy that this usually popular young person never made so poor an impression upon any man with whom she conversed. Only one of the party was pleased with her, and that was Mrs. Cartwright. That not very acute lady fancied that the more Lucy was unlike herself, the more she must be like a highly accomplished *dame du monde;* and the more absurd the girl became, the more did her mother think herself indebted to Minerva House.

There was another reason, too, why Lucy was uneasy with the stranger. The interest with which he regarded May was apparent, notwithstanding his, at times evident, attempts to disguise it. He had a thorough composure, which enabled him to talk to all the ladies at the same time; but whenever any pause took place, his eye always wandered to May, and settled upon her with an earnestness which more than once brought the blood into her cheeks. She, poor child, said but little, and was almost as much embarrassed by thoughts as Lucy was by the want of them. Fortunately, the weakness did not take the same form. But it was equally a relief to May as to Lucy when the two men rose to go; and then a few words were said about the object of their visit, which was simply an invitation to the approaching ball for the new acquaintance.

There was no difficulty about that.

"Of course," said Lucy to Mr. Hargrave, in the absence of Mrs. Cartwright,

who had made her escape some time before, "we shall have much pleasure in seeing your friend, and will not fail to send him an invitation; though he must be prepared for a very mixed society, as it is to be one of papa's official entertainments at the Town Hall, and the Shuttleton people—some of them, at least—are dreadfully rough."

This was said with a pretty little air which Lucy believed would be exactly that of a duke's daughter warning off an enamoured marquis from a feast which his grace her father was obliged to give to his tenantry.

"Oh! I have no fears," replied the captain, "of a few savages. I think they are rather a relief from the monotony of civilized society."

This not very brilliant remark was made mechanically; for Cecil Halidame was considering how he could obtain a piece of information without which he was reluctant to leave the house.

"I take it for granted," he added, in pursuance of his object, "that, as an additional set-off against the savages, the ball will have the presence of Miss—"

Here he paused, for he had not caught May's name when they were introduced, and this was the piece of information that he wanted.

"Oh, yes, indeed!" replied Lucy, quite herself again at the idea; "of course my dear friend May Pemberton will be there."

This time Captain Halidame must have heard the name, given as it was in Lucy's most assured voice; and either the name or the fact that May was to be at the ball must have caused the strange agitation which immediately marked his manner. He became pale, and then he made an irrelevant remark; and it was two or three minutes before he could muster up a commonplace expression of satisfaction such as was demanded by the occasion.

There was nothing novel or strange in the circumstances of the visit; but it had caused a great deal of embarrassment to three of those concerned, and Captain Halidame felt as relieved as either of the others when he once more found himself in the bleak square with his new but intimate friend Mr. Hargrave, who had nothing more dangerous about him than can come of educated whiskers, immaculate costume, and a cheerful and assured view of things in general.

As for Lucy, she did nothing all lunch time but talk about Captain Halidame. She recovered her self-possession wonderfully after he had

gone; and you would have fancied, hearing her talk, that she had been twisting him round her little finger from the first moment when she was confronted with him in the drawing-room. There were no mincing, fluttering, affected little ways now. She was once more Lucy Cartwright, the mayor's daughter, accustomed to have her own way, and who had not put her papa to the expense of keeping her two years at Minerva House for nothing.

The way she praised her new acquaintance was nothing short of disgraceful, and it was very fortunate that her father was not there to hear her. As for her mother, she set down everything she did not understand or consider quite right to Minerva House; and anything that her daughter did or said, after so much money had been spent on her education, could not, in this respectable lady's opinion, be otherwise than proper. If anything was wrong, she would have argued, had the question ever suggested itself, why should they have gone to all that expense?

Minerva House may have had something to do with Lucy's demonstration, but that establishment would scarcely have applauded it for all that. Captain Halidame might have had soft-speaking eyes and a dear gentle manner, and might have been in the habit of remarking that it was a fine day as if he meant an offer of marriage; but there was no occasion for Lucy to go into such particulars; and it would have been much more proper on the part of that young lady if she had kept her opinions on the subject to herself. As for May, admiring Halidame as she confessedly did, she ought to have been pleased to hear his praises. But girls are very strange. There is no understanding them nine times out of ten. And it might have been observed that the more Lucy commended the captain, the more annoyed did May look. At one time it really appeared as if a difference of opinion might be expected on the subject. This was after lunch was over, and May, after going upstairs for her hat, was coming down with her dear friend. Lucy saw that something had annoyed her, and spoke to her in such a kind, tender way, that May was quite disarmed, and hugging the astonished Lucy round the neck, leant upon her shoulder and fell to kissing her, apparently for no reason on earth.