

# MAX PEMBERTON AT HOME:

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR OF OUR NEXT SERIAL STORY.

BY ARTHUR H. LAWRENCE.

*Illustrated by Special Photographs.*



R. MAX PEMBERTON—the first instalment of whose story, “Kronstadt,” appears in the next issue of the WINDSOR—published his first book only six years ago, but the rapidity with which he has come to the front rank of authorship, and the way in which he has followed success with success in such books as “The Iron Pirate,” “The Impregnable City,” “The Little Huguenot,” and “A Puritan’s Wife,” is hardly more important than the fact that each book has shown an increase of power which, together with an opinion based upon some personal knowledge, tends to give one the assurance that this most imaginative and virile of authors has, in popular parlance, “come to stay.”

Mr. Pemberton, who was educated at the Merchant Taylors’ School and Caius College, Cambridge (M.A.), was intended for the Church. After taking his degree at the Bar, he decided to enter journalism, and though he began as a “free-lance” only eleven

years ago, he added to his natural ability so much energy that, having founded *Chums*, now so brightly edited by Mr. Ernest Foster, he is at the present time not only the editor of *Cassell’s Magazine*, but is also reviewer on the staff of the *Illustrated London News* and the *Daily Chronicle*. Such is the briefest possible summary of his work as a journalist. But journalism has been with Mr. Pemberton a means to an end, and during the last six years, concurrently with his other work, he has published some seven books, most of

which have passed through several editions and are hardly less popular in America than they are in Great Britain.

The connection between a man’s personality and his work is too obvious, I imagine, to need demonstrating, and there must be few of us who, after being captivated by a good book, do not feel a very decided inclination to “carry over”—as the bookkeepers say—our interest in the book to the individuality of the author. In some cases I have been told—and sometimes with cruel emphasis—that this is a process



*From a photo by*

MR. MAX PEMBERTON.

*[Elliott & Fry.]*

which brings its own disappointment with it, but, writing with a little more knowledge than can be gained in the course of one interview, one can very honestly say that this is very far from the truth in the case of Mr. Max Pemberton.

Polished, buoyant, high-spirited, in everything optimistic—the result perhaps of good nerves, an exceptionally well-balanced mind and equable temperament—ever displaying a genuine and intense love of adventure, I have always been troubled with the fancy that had Mr. Pemberton been born a century or so earlier he would have very admirably figured in the adventures which, in a more civilised and certainly less adventurous age, he must perforce describe with the pen. It is in this sense, and in the healthiness of the man, which is so clearly reflected in the healthiness of his books, that Mr. Pemberton's personality is identified in a very direct way with his creative work.

Mr. Pemberton is not, I should imagine, a man of variant moods. His fund of good spirits, like his energy, seems inexhaustible. Renowned as a rowing man, yielding to no one in his love of horse riding and hunting, an enthusiast at golf, tennis, and cycling, Mr. Pemberton in every way impresses one as being not less a man of action than a man of letters, and possessing as he does, in an exceptional degree, an imperturbable courtesy, without an atom of pose or of affectation of any sort; never without an opinion, and yet—a true compliment this—never didactic, it can hardly be wondered at that the most hardened interviewer, oppressed with much “booky” talk, and sometimes ill-natured talk, from all sorts of people, many of them troubled with “views” on sex

and psychological problems, should regard an interview with the brilliant author of “Kronstadt” as a pleasurable, although all too brief relaxation, rather than in the light of a task.

Mr. Pemberton's house is at West Hampstead, and it was after luncheon, and whilst comfortably ensconced in chairs—more suited to deliberate idling than the stern business of interviewing—on the tennis lawn at the rear of the house, that our actual interview began. The dalliance with coffee and cigarettes, the cheerfulness of the bright

sunshine—only equalled by the cheerfulness with which my host appeared to regard the interviewing ordeal—should have suggested thoughts of the most peaceable kind; but, notwithstanding his intense geniality and good-humour, there is something in Mr. Pemberton's irrepressible love of the adventurous, his keen eye, slight but erect and athletic figure, which maintained the idea in my mind that only a sword, or a belt full of pistols and knives, together with less conventional attire was needed to complete the picture which I had in my

mind's eye of my host as the joyous leader of the “phantom army,” as an “iron pirate,” or as one of the defenders of an apparently impregnable city. It was this which prompted my first question, to which my host promptly replied.

“Oh, yes, whenever travelling in certain countries—the North of Spain for example—I carry a revolver. It's absolutely necessary—you would not feel safe without it; and I don't believe in carrying a toy. People who travel on conventional tours of course do not need such a weapon, but it's an invaluable friend if you travel where Englishmen do



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[W. H. Bunnett.]

MR. MAX PEMBERTON'S RESIDENCE AT HAMPSTEAD.

not often go. My brother, by the way, is a capital shot with the pistol, but as he never travels it's a gift simply wasted. He will fix up five pieces of paper no bigger than a halfpenny, and at a distance of fifteen paces can drop one piece after the other without missing a shot.

"Of all forms of sport I certainly think rowing is the most health-giving, but I am perhaps more fond now of horse-riding



"SPY'S" CARTOON OF MAX PEMBERTON IN "VANITY FAIR."

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and hunting, though I have also gone in a good deal in my time for cycling and running. No, I never actually rowed for the 'Varsity eight. I had another chance of rowing for Cambridge, but the invitation came when I was just starting journalistic work, and I could not then afford the necessary time. Of course you know what a regular business training for the race is, and I really could not possibly afford the necessary time for it. But you don't want me in cold blood to

record my prowess?" Mr. Pemberton interjects smilingly. I replied in the affirmative, and solemnly regretted that all the "pots" he had won had not been arranged for my inspection.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure—I don't like the task. Let me see. Oh, I ought to tell you that the first time I rowed in my college eight I was lucky enough to be one of the winning crew, and then in the scratch fours we—that is Caius College—won that event also.

"In running I won the hundred yards' event five years in succession at the Merchant Taylors' School. I used also to go in for cycling races occasionally at the Alexandra Palace and elsewhere, and when I was seventeen I rode a dead-heat in a ten miles' race—rather a curious thing that—with my friend, Alfred C. Harmsworth. I take advantage of every opportunity I get to play golf, but really and truly I enjoy horse-riding more than anything else, though I think rowing is the healthiest form of sport if you don't overdo it. The danger is that it may strain the heart.

"It was a terrible struggle getting away, so to speak, from active 'Varsity life to the sedentary work of a journalist. After two years of it I completely broke down, and for about twelve months my nerves were all anyhow. Since those first two years I have managed to make a fair compromise. I have to draw the line in rather a hard-and-fast way. If I go in too much for athletics it interferes with my work. Yes, hard mental work does not prevent one from enjoying sport in any form, but if you reverse the process and take at all violent exercise in the first instance you can't do mental work; the brain seems to have nothing to draw upon. Unless you can spare the whole day or a week for your exercise you must exercise your brain first, and exercise the body afterwards.

"I don't think you can over-estimate the value of travel to a young man who intends going in for journalism or literature. For many years I have made it a practice to reserve six weeks for travelling, and then I always get hold of places which, to coin a word, are unexcursionised. It is just as easy as the tourist method and much more instructive.

"Answers and Tit-Bits next proved very good friends to me, but without speaking disrespectfully of that work—in fact, I keenly enjoyed it—I naturally did not regard it as my *Ultima Thule*. Yes, in the days of my

apprenticeship I wasted a good deal of time grubbing about in the British Museum and writing essays, and so on. It may have been good work, or it may not. I suppose you are right," Mr. Pemberton exclaimed laughingly; "that is very much the 'Varsity idea of journalism. You feel you want to educate people, and all the rest of it, but if you are wise you end up by trying to amuse them. My first article was accepted by *Vanity Fair*, and was about the Henley Regatta—I dare say my reputation as a rowing man helped me there; and when I became 'Mr. Answers' I had quite an exciting time of it. Up in a balloon, and down in the bowels of the earth, following detectives, driving cabs, and all the rest of it. I think I did pretty well all an energetic young journalist could very well be expected to do.

"By the way," my host exclaims, "I ought to tell you that I became the recipient of some amusing letters as the result of the publication of my 'Varsity Tales in the WINDSOR. In one of the tales where I relate that, in consequence of the men lighting a bonfire, a 'Varsity don came out in his slipped feet, with a shawl round his shoulders, I had a very indignant letter from an old don in the country, who told me he was quite certain that no don would ever venture into the courts in this guise, and reproving me most severely for telling such an obvious untruth. The story happened to be perfectly true. But then, again, just those things which the University papers described as being too utterly preposterous, were just those things which I had seen with my own eyes. It only shows you how ignorant one half of the world is of what the other half of the world does."

Mr. Pemberton talks very frankly, not only of book-writers and books generally, but also of his own work, and has a pretty

knack of turning the tables on the interviewer.

"How long will the present taste for romance last?" he asks suddenly, and when I endeavour to evade the question by suggesting that there is a pretty regular ebb and flow in the public taste for romance and realism, Mr. Pemberton changes his ground with the question, "Are there any writers of the present day who are likely to last?" But in discussing the point I rather gather that Mr. Pemberton, having no inordinate yearning concerning the judgment of posterity, does display a very natural and common-sense preference for the appreciation of the



From a photo by

THE STUDY.

[W. H. Bennett.]

people of his own day. It is not difficult to get back from the general to the particular, and so I ask him to tell me which of his own books has gained the most popularity, and which is his own favourite work.

"'The Iron Pirate' and 'The Impregnable City' have sold remarkably well, both in Great Britain and America, but considering that 'A Puritan's Wife' is my most recent book, and has therefore been out a comparatively short time, I think it has done best of all. One is necessarily a bad judge of one's own work, but 'The Little Huguenot' is, in my own judgment, my best piece of work."

"Yes, I've a natural preference for adven-

ture writers, but I think one ominous initial gives the key to my three favourite authors, Defoe, Dumas and Dickens. Then I really do love the short stories of Guy de Maupassant. Stevenson influenced me most; and," Mr. Pemberton added cheerfully, "one of my first books was kindly described as a laborious and unsuccessful imitation of Stevenson's style! Of recently published books I have most enjoyed reading W. W. Jacobs' 'Many Cargoes.' You don't try to laugh, you can't help it.

"Yes, fifteen hundred words a day is my own limit, as a rule. It would be absurd to say that I never do more, but certainly I

line in my life with which I am thoroughly pleased, and have never published a book without feeling that I ought to have done it very much better. Sometimes I get in a really desperate state over my work. Occasionally one seems to get a little nearer one's ideal, but, as a rule, it seems very far off."

Then I recollect suddenly that Mr. Pemberton is that dreaded autocrat, an editor, and so, with the querulousness of a contributor, I ask him if he is much afflicted by the general editorial desire to get something, in the way of an article, which has never been thought of before, in sublime defiance of the wise king's remark that there is "nothing new under the sun."

"Well, of course, that is the editor's dream," Mr. Pemberton retorts smilingly; "I won't say it's his nightmare. But I find that the real difficulty with a paper is not a question of ideas, but of getting a competent staff of contributors. The art of editing no longer consists in the writing of manuscript, nor does it consist in finding ideas, but in discovering the right sort of men. The ideas will come afterwards. People will not believe it, but—I think I can speak for other editors too—the demand is really in excess of the supply."

"So that, instead of the popular picture of the anxious contributor knocking at the editorial door, asking for work and finding none, we have the door open wide, and the editor holding out a beckoning hand to contributors?"

"In a sense, yes. We beckon, and the wrong sort of would-be contributors turn up. They are either downright amateurs, entirely disqualified for the work, or tired-out folk without a living idea for their stock-in-trade. It is a great relief to any editor when he gets hold of a young man to whom he can give a commission with the certainty that it will be carried out conscientiously, and done in a business-like way.



From a photo by]

MR. AND MRS. PEMBERTON IN THE GARDEN.

[W. H. Bunnett.

make an absolute rule never to write more than two thousand words in any one day. Sometimes one finds one can write nothing at all. That's very painful; but we'll make no further allusion to that. My experience is that there is often a temptation to go beyond the two thousand words limit, and also to imagine that what one is doing is exceedingly fine, but when you come to read it over you find that the work you have done in excess of your limit indicates that you have gone a bit beyond your own strength—it lacks energy, in a word, it seems flat. But I can tell you this much," Mr. Pemberton added energetically, "I've never written a

"The value of an article does not lie so much in the root-idea as in the way the idea is worked out.

"Of the wrong sort of contributors, I have found the lady contributor more persistent than the man. I have one charming old lady who sends me up from the country a big manuscript every fortnight. I have had a fortnightly manuscript from her for the last two or three years. One would like to accept a manuscript as the reward of such persistence, but then you couldn't publish it, so what can you do?"

"No, I have never had anything to do with a lunatic in my editorial capacity, though there are men who seem sane and are not. Because I changed one word in a contributor's manuscript—a word not used in polite society—he wrote me a letter which might very well have come from an asylum. Did I answer it? No; I just swept it into the w.p.b. I saw no other way of dealing with it. That reminds me, though, that I was with a well-known editor the other day when a lunatic of the dangerous order came into his office. He wanted to see a proof of an article which my friend had never received, or even heard of. 'Give me that proof!' said the man, his eyes flashing. 'Certainly,' said my friend; 'I will whistle up for it.' He did whistle up, and suggested through the tube that two strong men should be sent down at once. Down came two herculean 'comps.,' and the lunatic was hustled outside in no time. I suppose most editors have these little trials occasionally. But after all, the most alarming difficulty is to get one's magazine filled up with suitable matter."

"Then, as a reviewer, Mr. Pemberton, I suppose you are not prepared to own up that reviews, taking them all round, are imperfectly and hurriedly done?"

"Well, no, I am not," Mr. Pemberton replies with a grim smile. "From all I know of reviewers I should describe them as very capable, fair and painstaking men. I admit that there are a good many black

sheep, and, as an editor, one knows that if an erratic young man applying for work, with a vague idea of going in for journalism, is asked what he can do, he promptly replies, 'Oh, I can review the book or the play,' and very often a good-natured editor will give him a book. Yes, it's misplaced good-nature, and it is not a pleasant arrangement for the writer of that particular book. Probably the young man has no qualifications at all, and cheerfully sets out to write a review in ten minutes of a book which has taken the author three years to write. It may be the author's pet subject, and the young reviewer, knowing nothing about it, will pose as a very Socrates on the question. That is a great drawback. There are undoubtedly too many ignorant reviewers about. In regard to my own



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[W. H. Bennett.]

THE DRAWING-ROOM.

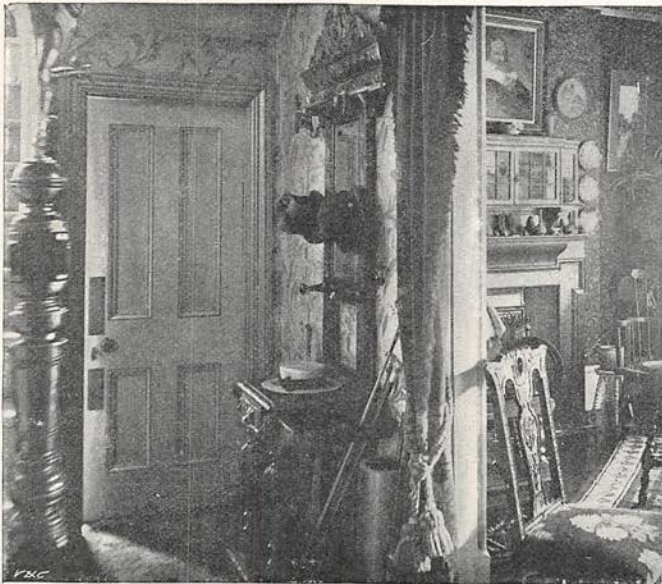
books, I have been very well treated and have nothing to complain of. No, I have never had the slightest cause for complaint.

"As to the influence which reviews have on the sale of books, things have changed, of course, very much of late years. When there were very few papers people were undoubtedly greatly influenced by the reviews which those papers contained. With the multiplicity of reviews—an average book getting, say, a hundred notices, some praising, some cursing, and others damning with very faint praise, and so on—people have grown more indifferent. I am afraid that it has come down to this, that all reviews, favourable and otherwise, are looked upon as a sort of advertisement. One does not

expect them to shape public opinion. But this does not apply to a long and well-written review in, say, the *Times*, the *Chronicle*, or the *Athenæum*."

But though there is a temptation to discuss many more things with Mr. Max Pemberton—and one feels that his geniality will bear a considerable strain—an interviewer's catechism must have some limitations. So I eventually take leave of my host with the regretfulness with which human nature is apt to regard the fact that all pleasant episodes—like books—must have an ending; and I do so with the conviction that had I not read a single line of Mr. Pemberton's work, and had been told that his books were half as interesting as the

man himself, I should thereby understand that he had done some exceedingly good work. His mind is one which, to adopt Bacon's classification, is "quick on the turn"; in his work it is the play of the rapier which flashes upon you, but there is a strong arm behind it. All his books are characterised by a strong central idea and excellent workmanship. You are—if I may detail my own experience—carried from page to page with lightning rapidity, the interest of the story increases as it progresses, until you realise with regret that the melancholy little word "Finis" is reached. It is with much the same feeling of regret that one takes leave of so whole-hearted and so interesting a man as Mr. Max Pemberton.



From a photo by]

THE INTERVIEWER'S LAST GLIMPSE.

[W. H. Bunnett.