

ONE

‘Worse Than 100 Boys’



The eldest daughter of the portrait, Mary Constance Wyndham, was born to Percy and Madeline in London, in summer's dog days, on 3 August 1862. Percy, called 'the Hon'ble P' by his friends, was the favoured younger son of the vastly wealthy Lord Leconfield of Petworth House in Sussex. The Conservative Member for West Cumberland, he had a kind heart and the family traits of an uncontrollable temper and an inability to dissemble. It was true of him, as was said of his father, that he had 'no power of disguising his feelings, if he liked one person more than another it was simply written on his Countenance'.¹

Percy's Irish wife Madeline was different. Known in infancy as 'the Sunny Baby',² she was renowned for her expansive warmth. 'She is an Angel . . . She has the master-key of life – love – which unlocks everything for her and makes one feel her immortal,' said Georgiana Burne-Jones, who, like her husband Edward, was among Madeline's closest friends.³ Yet in courtship Percy had spoken much of Madeline's reserve – 'you sweet mystery,' he called her,⁴ one of very few to recognize that her personality seemed to be shut up in different boxes, to some of which only she held the key.

Percy and Madeline were both twenty-seven years old. In two years of marriage, they had established a pattern of dividing their time between Petworth, Cockermouth Castle – a family property in Percy's constituency given to them by his father for their use – and fashionable Belgrave Square, at no. 44. Madeline's mother, Pamela, Lady Campbell, came over from Ireland for the birth, and during Madeline's labour sat anxiously with Percy in a little room off her daughter's bedroom. The labour was relatively short – barely four and a half hours – but it was difficult. Lady Campbell had threatened to call her own daughter 'Rhinocera' when she was born because of her incredible size. Mary, at birth, weighed an eye-watering 11 pounds. '[T]he size and hardness of the baby's head (for which I am afraid I am to blame)', Percy told his sister Fanny with apologetic pride, had required the use of forceps to bring the child into the world. 'Of course we should have liked a boy but I am very grateful to God that matters have gone so well,' Percy concluded.⁵

Percy and Madeline's daughter held within her person the blood of Ireland and England – a physical embodiment of the vexed union between the kingdoms. Mary grew up on tales of her maternal great-grandfather, Lord Edward FitzGerald, hero and martyr of the 1798 Irish Rebellion. Her own London childhood was punctuated by acts of violence by the newly formed republican Fenian Brotherhood. In 1844 Parliament had debated, at length, the motion 'Ireland is occupied, not governed'. An ambitious young Benjamin Disraeli drew for the Commons a picture of 'a starving population, an absentee aristocracy . . . an alien church, and . . . the weakest executive in the world'.⁶ While the novelist Disraeli may have been exercising a little artistic licence – certainly by 1873 only 20 per cent of Ireland's aristocracy were technically absentee⁷ – fundamentally his depiction was, and remained, true. Mary and her siblings were brought up to mourn the fate of 'darling Ireland'.⁸ With a Catholic strain passed down from Lord Edward's French wife, they sympathized with the Catholic masses.

Mary described herself and her younger brother George in childhood as 'the Fenians of the family'.⁹

Lady Edward – 'La Belle Pamela' – was officially the adopted daughter of Madame de Genlis, educationalist disciple of Rousseau. In all probability, Pamela was de Genlis' biological child, by her lover Philippe duc d'Orléans. Orléans was Louis XVI's cousin. He voted for the King's execution during the French Revolution, then was guillotined himself when his royal blood rendered him counter-revolutionary. Mary's was an exotic heritage, romantic, royal, with a hint of disreputableness. Like all her siblings, she was proud of it.

Mary was born at the cusp of a new age, as a myriad of developments – some welcome, others not – forced Britain and her class to reassess their identities. She was born within five years of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the famous Huxley–Wilberforce debate on evolution, which her father Percy had attended;¹⁰ the 1857 Indian Rebellion which led to control over the sub-continent being passed from the British East India Company to the British Crown; and Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke's discovery of the Nile's source. When Mary was born, the working classes (and all women) were still unenfranchised – only one in five men could vote. Neither William Gladstone nor Disraeli, those giants of the late Victorian political arena, had yet formed their own ministries. Upper-class women could not appear in public without a chaperone. During her childhood, Joseph Bazalgette built the Victoria and Albert Embankments to cover the new sewage system that meant the Thames was no longer the city's chamberpot. The telephone and the first traffic light (short-lived, it was installed outside the Houses of Parliament in 1868, only to explode in 1869, gravely wounding the policeman operating it) were inventions of her early youth. Mary, who as a child had fossils shown and explained to her by her father, was born into a world ebullient in its capacity for exploration and invention but, in post-Darwinian terms, questing and unsure. The British were becoming,

as Charles Dilke's bestselling *Greater Britain* said, a 'race girdling the earth',¹¹ but within their own country the patrician male's stranglehold on power was being loosened. Mary, hopeful, endlessly curious, surrounded by novelty and change, was a child of that age.

Above all, Mary was the child of a love match – on one side, at least. It had been a *coup de foudre* for shy, crotchety Percy when in 1860 dawned he met Madeline Campbell in Ireland. Madeline was beautiful, dark and voluptuous, but she was more than that. Her earthy physicality exuded life, and enhanced it in others. 'People in her presence feel like trees or birds at their best, singing or flourishing according to their own natures with an easy exuberance . . . she has a peculiar gift for making this world glorious to all who meet her in it,' said her son George.¹²

Percy and Madeline were engaged in London in July, and married in Ireland in October. During a brief interim period of separation, as Madeline returned to Ireland, Percy gave voice to his infatuation in sheaves of letters, still breathtaking in their intensity, that daily swooped across the Irish Sea. '[D]ear Glory of my Life sweet darling, dear Cobra, dear gull with the changing eyes, most precious, rare rich Madeline sweet Madge of the soft cheeks',¹³ said Percy, pouring forth his love, longing and dreams for the future. With barely concealed lust he begged Madeline to describe her bedroom so he could imagine her preparing her 'dear body' for bed, and recalled, with attempted lasciviousness charming in its naivety, their brief moments of physical contact – a kiss stolen on a balcony at a ball; a moment knocked against each other in a bumpy carriage ride. '[I]f these letters don't make you *know* how I love you, let there be no more pens, ink and paper in the world.'¹⁴

No corresponding letters from Madeline survive. Brief fragments of reported speech suggest she was more world-weary than her besotted swain. 'Oh Percy, Percy, I don't think you know very much about me, but that's no matter,' she told him. Some of her descendants think that there may have been a failed love affair in her past;

if so, she successfully, and characteristically, erased all trace of it.¹⁵ Her reserve only strengthened Percy's attraction.

Madeline was well-born, if of colourful ancestry, but she had no money to speak of. Her widowed mother had brought up twelve children on an army pension. Madeline would receive just £50 a year on her mother's death.¹⁶ The infatuated Percy persuaded his forbidding father – who succumbed immediately to Madeline's charm on meeting her – to give his blessing to the match, and to dower his bride. A month before the Wyndhams married, £35,727 16s 5d in government bonds (equivalent to around £2.75 million today) was transferred from Lord Leconfield's Bank of England account to the trustees of Percy and Madeline's marriage settlement.¹⁷ The trust was to provide for Madeline and any younger children of her marriage. From the capital's interest Madeline would receive annually a personal allowance, known as pin money, of around £300. A provision stipulated that if the marriage proved childless, the money would devolve back to the Leconfields. Otherwise there was no indication that Madeline had not brought this money herself to the marriage.¹⁸ A baronet's genteelly impoverished seventh daughter had been transformed, in effect, into an heiress of the first water.

The provision was never exercised. Percy and Madeline had five adored children over the course of a decade – the three girls, and the boys George and Guy. 'Ever since your birth has my Heart & Soul loved you & laughed with you & wept with you . . . sang to you to sleep – & anguished with you in all your sorrows . . .' wrote Madeline Wyndham to her youngest, Pamela.¹⁹ She might have made the comment to any of her children, all of whom Percy deemed 'confidential', his highest form of praise.²⁰ Madeline Wyndham had been raised in a Rousseauesque environment of loving simplicity. The Campbell girls had no governess – doubtless partly for financial reasons – and were encouraged to educate themselves, reading whatever they chose, and making off into the fields around Woodview, their rambling house in Stillorgan, then

a small village outside Dublin, to explore the natural world. Percy, raised in frigid splendour by evangelical parents who banned everything from novels to waltzing, was entranced upon first visiting Woodview. He vowed that his children would be raised in a similarly warm, loving and natural milieu. And so, despite an aristocratic lifestyle, the loving intensity of life among the Wyndhams was almost bourgeois.²¹

Mary, like all her siblings, was born into privilege's heartland. The family's life was played out against a backdrop of staff – butler, housekeeper, footmen, housemaids, cook, kitchen maids, stable boys, gardeners and the 'odd-man' who lit the house's lamps each evening as dusk fell. Only the absence of this – mostly silent – audience would have been remarkable. Madeline Wyndham never travelled anywhere without her lady's maid Easton (known as 'Eassy'), nor Percy without his Irish valet Thompson ('Tommy'). Their children's retinue included their nanny – the magnificently named Horsenail – nursemaid Emma Drake and, when a little older, governesses and tutors.

Society – of which the Wyndhams were impeccably a part – was a close-knit, interconnected group of 'the upper 10,000', four hundred or so families constituting Britain's ruling class. To outsiders it was an impenetrable, corporate mass with 'a common freemasonry of blood, a common education, common pursuits, common ideas, a common dialect, a common religion, and – what more than anything else binds men together – a common prestige . . . growled at occasionally, but on the whole conceded, and even, it must be owned, secretly liked by the country at large', said the Radical Bernard Cracroft in 1867.²² During the mid-Victorian years, when the Queen and Prince Albert set the model of domestic rectitude, evangelism had a firm grip on the upper classes. Yet by the 1860s Darwinism had loosened that hold; and a Prince of Wales who liked a good time had come of age. Bertie's fast-living, hard-gambling Marlborough House Set became known for its sybaritic tendencies. Meanwhile, Percy and Madeline were part of a set

considered markedly bohemian since, in the words of the novelist and designer Alice Comyns Carr, they ‘took a certain pride in being the first members of Society to bring the people of their own set into friendly contact with the distinguished folk of art and literature’.²³

Madeline and her female friends – aristocrats all – dressed in flowing gowns, tied their hair back simply and draped themselves in scarves and bangles. Madeline herself was reputedly the first woman in England to smoke, with a habit of three Turkish cigarettes a day, one after each meal.²⁴ Her friend Georgie Sumner dyed her hair red to resemble more closely ‘stunners’ like Lizzie Siddal, the Pre-Raphaelite muse. They read the bibles of Pre-Raphaelitism, Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* and Tennyson’s poem of the same title, and, in the setting of their own family seats – Scottish castles and English stately homes – posed in medieval dress for Julia Margaret Cameron’s camera. They frequented Little Holland House, home of Cameron’s sister, Sara Prinsep, where G. F. Watts was literally the artist in residence (he moved in during a period of illness, and never left); and Leighton House, the creation of Frederic Leighton, later President of the Royal Academy. They considered Burne-Jones, as yet unrecognized in the wider world, to be a genius. Madeline was a talented amateur artist, particularly in the decorative arts, with a near-perfect eye. In 1872 she helped to found the School of Art Needlework with her friend Princess Christian, a daughter of the Queen. In later life, she studied enamelling under that craft’s master, Alexander Fisher. All the artists Madeline knew thought she had a true artist’s soul. Beauty could cause her ‘thoughts that fill my heart to bursting’, she told Watts.²⁵

For the Pre-Raphaelites and their heirs, beauty’s pursuit was not indulgence but necessity. Their dreamy art, born out of the Industrial Revolution, was intended to counteract, even arrest, the modern world’s ugliness. For Burne-Jones’s great friend and business partner William Morris, whose Oxford Street store, Morris & Co., was the favoured emporium of the English aesthetic classes,

this philosophy led him to political activism and ardent socialism. Burne-Jones was content to improve society by feeding its soul through its eyes. The provision of art to cultivate and inspire the masses was now part of civic responsibility, reflected in the large public art galleries constructed in urban centres of the industrial north.

Mary's early childhood in Cumberland was like a Pre-Raphaelite painting brought to life. The Wyndhams lived at Cockermouth Castle, a strange, half-ruined property on the River Cocker's banks, until 1869. Afterwards they rented Isel Hall, an Elizabethan manor a few miles away. Madeline Wyndham took her children out among the heather to draw and paint, and read aloud to them Arthurian tales. At night she sang *berceuses*, French lullabies learnt from her own mother, and left them to sleep, soothed by the sound of the Cocker's rushing waters and owls hooting in the dark. She had miniature suits of armour made for George and Guy. The children played at knights and damsels with Mary dressed in her mother's long flowing skirts.²⁶ A portrait of eight-year-old Mary in Cumberland by the Wyndhams' friend Val Prinsep, in the flat, chalky style characteristic of their artistic circle, shows a tall, round-eyed beautiful child. In wide straw hat and loose mustard-yellow dress, she gazes directly at the viewer, bundling in her skirts armfuls of flowers.²⁷

One of Mary's earliest adventures in childhood was scrambling after her father through thick heather up Skiddaw, the mountain dominating the Cumbrian skyline, with a trail of dogs in search of grouse; then sleeping overnight in a little lodge perched on the mountainside.²⁸ In adulthood, Mary wrote lyrically of 'the club & stag, the moss, the oak & beech fern, bog myrtle, & grass of Parnassus – Skiddaw in his splendid majesty – covered with "purple patches" (of heather) with deep greens & russet reds & swept by the shadows of the clouds – my heart leaps up – when I behold – *Skiddaw* – against the sky . . .'²⁹ Mary considered herself a lifelong 'pagan', fearlessly finding freedom in wildness. She attributed these

qualities to her Cumberland childhood. She mourned 'beloved Isel' when the Wyndhams finally gave it up in 1876. Ever after, Cumberland was a lost Arcadia to her.

When George was born in August 1863, Lady Campbell told Percy he 'deserved a boy for having so graciously received the girl last year!'³⁰ In 1865 the Wyndhams had another boy, Guy. With two brothers so close to her in age, Mary was practically a boy herself. She learnt to ride on a donkey given to the children by Madeline when they were toddlers,³¹ was taught to hunt and hawk by her father's valet Tommy, and was keeping up with the hounds at just nine years old, even if, on that first occasion, she told her mother ruefully, 'I did not see the fox.'³² She kept pet rooks which she fed on live snails, and begged her mother for permission to be taken down a Cumberland coal mine by her brothers' tutor.³³ Some summers, the Wyndhams visited Madeline's favourite sister, Emily Ellis, at her home in Hyères, the French town at the westernmost point of the Côte d'Azur, which was becoming increasingly popular with the British. There Mary scrambled willingly along the narrow tunnels of the Grotte des Fées into a cavern of stalagmites and stalactites. While the other members of her party sat and ate oranges, she caught 'a dear dear little soft downy long eared bat' which, she informed her mother, in her father's absence she had installed in his dressing room: 'all day he sleeps hung up to the ceiling by his two hind legs'.³⁴

High spirited to the point of being uncontrollable, the children exhausted a stream of governesses. At Deal Castle in Kent, home of the Wyndhams' friend Admiral Clanwilliam, Captain of the Cinque Ports, marine sergeants were deputed to drill the children on the ramparts to tire them out.³⁵ Their arrival in Belgrave Square's communal garden, clad in fishermen's jerseys, whooping and hollering on being released from their lessons, prompted celebration among their peers and anxiety among their playmates' parents. At least one couple instructed their governess not to let her charges play with 'those wild Wyndham children'.³⁶ In Mary's stout

babyhood Percy nicknamed her ‘Chang’ after a popular sensation, an 8-foot-tall Chinese who entertained visitors – for a fee – at Piccadilly’s Egyptian Hall. Mary grew into a ‘strapping lass’. ‘How well and strong I was, never tired,’ she said in later life, now thin and enervated, recalling wistfully her days as a rambunctious, lanky ringleader, strongest and most daring of the three siblings. ‘I was worse than 100 boys.’³⁷

The fairytale had a darker side. Madeline Wyndham concealed beneath her calm, loving exterior a mind seething with dread. She had a paranoid strain capable of rendering her literally insensible from anxiety. A childhood of loss – her father’s death when she was twelve, a beloved elder brother’s five years after that – during the years of the ‘Great Hunger’, the famine that, by death and emigration, diminished Ireland’s population by up to a quarter,³⁸ had a formative effect upon her. She was intensely spiritual, mystical and religious. Her deep foreboding of fate compounded rather than diminished that faith: ‘the memory of death gave to the passing hours their supreme value for her,’ said her friend Edith Olivier.³⁹ Olivier had looked through Madeline’s vellum-bound commonplace books to find them crammed with dark thoughts. ‘All strange and terrible things are welcome, but comforts we despise,’ reads one entry.⁴⁰ ‘God to her is, I think, pre-eminently the “King of Glory”,’ said Madeline’s son George in later years,⁴¹ but in Madeline’s mind glory came as much from darkness as from light.

When, during the Wyndhams’ courtship, Madeline had confessed to bleak moods, Percy simply denied them. He did not think she was permanently in ‘low spirits’, he said, advising against articulating such thoughts lest ‘the hearer should think them stronger than they are and permanently there when in reality they are not’. For Percy, anxieties that seemed all consuming at the time dissipated within ‘half an hour’, a day at most, like clouds puffed across the sky.⁴² In fact, Madeline’s volatile moods and her sporadic nervous collapses suggest that a strain of manic depression ran through the family – what George called the ‘special neurotic phenomena of his

family'.⁴³ The impact on her children was intense. She invested in them all her apocalyptic hopes, determined they should succeed and prove her family's merit, convinced the world conspired to bring them down. It is telling that, despite her undoubted love for her mother, Mary described Percy as 'one of the people – if not the one that I loved best in the world – who was unfailingly tender & who loved me more than anyone did and without whose sympathy I have never imagined life'.⁴⁴

The Wyndhams' tribe naturally split between Mary, George and Guy, the trio born in the early 1860s, and the 'little girls', Madeline (known as 'Mananai', from what was obviously a childish attempt to pronounce her name) born in 1869 and Pamela in 1871.⁴⁵ As a consequence of Lord Leconfield's death in 1869 their early childhoods were also markedly different.

Leconfield, intensely disliking his heir Henry, left everything that was not tied up in an entail to Percy. He created a trust for Percy and his heirs of a Sussex estate (shortly afterwards sold to Henry for £48,725 8s 10d),⁴⁶ land in Yorkshire, Cumberland and Ireland, £15,000 worth of life insurance and £16,000 worth of shares in turnpike roads and gas companies, and made provision for the trustees to raise a further £20,000 from other Sussex land. Percy received outright the family's South Australian estates (bought by Percy's maverick grandfather, the third Earl of Egremont, Turner's patron and three-times owner of the Derby winner, for his estranged wife); most of the household effects from East Lodge, a Brighton family property, including thirty oil paintings and all the plate; the plate from Grove, another family property; and the first choice of five carriage horses. Leconfield's will was a calculated, devastating snub to Henry. For a while, the Wyndhams continued to visit Henry and his wife Constance at Petworth, but soon enough the brothers had a spectacular row over the port after dinner. The resulting estrangement between the families lasted for almost a decade,⁴⁷ despite all the attempts of their wives, still close friends, to heal it.

Leconfield's death provoked the Wyndhams' move to Isel from

Cockermouth Castle, which now belonged to Henry; and his will made them rich. Percy and Madeline now commissioned Leighton and his architect George Aitchison to decorate Belgrave Square's entrance hall. *The Cymbalists* was a magnificent mural painted above the central staircase – five life-sized, classical figures in a dance against a gold background. Above that was Aitchison's delicate frieze of flowers, foliage and wild birds in pinks, greens, greys and powder blue. Even the most unobservant visitor could see this was an artistic house.

Shortly after Leconfield's death, Percy visited his sister Blanche and her husband Lord Mayo in India, where Mayo was Viceroy. (Mayo had previously served as Ireland's Chief Secretary for almost a decade, and it was Blanche who had introduced Percy to Madeline, when Percy visited them in Ireland.)⁴⁸ While Percy was abroad, Lady Campbell, in her seventies, was suddenly taken ill. Madeline Wyndham hastened to Ireland with newborn Mananai, Guy and Horsenail, leaving Mary and George, with their governess Mademoiselle Grivel, at Mrs Stanley's boarding house in Keswick, Cumberland. ' . . . I am so sorry that dear Granny is so ill for it must make you so unhappy. George and I will try to be very good indeed so as to make you happy,' Mary wrote to her mother.⁴⁹ Lady Campbell died shortly afterwards, and Madeline made her way back to her elder children: 'so glad I shall be to see you my little darling . . . you were so good to me when I was so knocked down by hearing such sad news.'⁵⁰ Almost precisely upon Madeline and Percy's reuniting, Madeline fell pregnant. Pamela Genevieve Adelaide was born in January 1871, at Belgrave Square like all her siblings.

The little girls were born into the age of Gladstone. In 1867, Disraeli had pushed Lord Derby's Tory ministry into 'the leap in the dark': the Reform Act that gave the vote to all male householders in the towns, as well as male lodgers who paid rent of £10 a year or more for unfurnished accommodation, almost doubling the electorate. In the boroughs, the hitherto unenfranchised working