

object of reverence to all who behold her. It's quite absurd to let people be so superstitious—it's wrong."

"You old idiot," Hugh protested. "It's no business of yours to interfere with other people's beliefs, George; and it would be abominable bad taste, to say the least of it, to do anything to offend these simple, quiet people. Besides, the Madonna is always the Madonna."

He said no more, aware of the utter uselessness of attempting to argue with Mowbray, whose obstinacy was proverbial; but his worst fears were realized a few moments later when, just as the Madonna's image was passing under the balcony, the smiling little wooden Madonna—such a brave, resolute little Madonna—George Mowbray deliberately leaned forward over the balcony and dropped some pink paper streamers over the head and shoulders of the image, crying out as he did so, in laughing, reckless tones:

"*Mi-careme—mi-careme!*"

He was hardly prepared, young and headstrong as he was, for the loud roar of angry voices which answered him, nor for the cry of "Sacrilege—sacrilege!" which burst from the throats of the crowd. A crowd no longer gay, good tempered, and peaceful, but a host of men and women stirred to their deepest depths—fierce-eyed and vehement—shrill of voice.

"Beat him—stone him—punish the insult to the little Madonna! Kill the insolent foreigner!"

So they shouted, the pale, angry townfolk of Pontier, and with their voices mingled the oaths of the fishermen who reaped their harvest from the sea, and, for a second, things looked black—very black indeed—for George Mowbray, and to the day of his death the young man never forgot the loud, shrill shouts of the infuriated mob of angry men and women who hurled themselves against the closed doors of the inn, thirsting to avenge the insult to their Madonna.

"I'm sorry," Mowbray muttered to his friends, "that I have got you into this row, old men!" Then he straightened himself to his full height and waited for what was to come. But he knew he could do nothing against the human wave thundering at the door of the inn. These angry folk could trample him to death under their feet if they chose—pound him to a jelly.

"My children—my dear children!" The *cure* held up his hand, the gentle, silver-haired old man whom all Pontier loved; and as the priest spoke, the crowd halted in their wild attack on the door to listen to what the *cure* had to say.

"What are you about, my children?" he asked. "Is blood to be shed—and on this day of all days? Are we going to annoy the little Madonna, who is all love, all tenderness, by a display of brute passion? Why, I am ashamed of you—ashamed of you all. I could weep that you understand her so little, my children."

He waved a thin, frail hand, and as he did so order followed on disorder. Women began to weep gently—softly—and the men no longer clenched their hands, nor did the fisherfolk search for their knives.

As for George Mowbray, he drew a long, choked breath; then he realized that the *cure's* eyes were fixed upon him, and the next second the old man addressed him in stern, clear tones:

"You will be sorry for what you have done, my son—sorry, in God's good time; you have been lacking in respect to the little Madonna—but your sin is the arrogance of youth. You do not know—you do not understand."

He said no more, and a moment later the procession had passed on. The whole episode was apparently over.

But George Mowbray, crouching back against the balustraded balcony, felt acutely conscious of the shameful humiliation of all that had happened, and the sorry part he had played. He had tried to laugh at the little Madonna, and now it appeared that he owed his life to her priest, and he hated the little wooden image—he hated it. He had been spared by the mob because the Madonna must not be annoyed; but he would rather they had crushed him under their feet, he thought, he had rather they had stoned him with their stones.

His friends, too, his travelling companions! He could see that they judged him hardly—that they thought he had behaved shamefully, as perhaps he had; but, even so, he was not going to own up to it—no, not he, and a mood of utter sullenness descended upon Mowbray. He felt a moral Ishmael, and that his hand was against every man's.

"Phew! That was a narrow squeak!" Heron spoke in low tones. The young man had turned rather pale, and Mowbray scorned him in his heart for a coward, then scowled impatiently at the landlord, who had by now made his way up to the sitting-room, and was begging the Englishmen, in shrill, excitable tones, to take their departure from the inn,

for he would not harbour any guests who had insulted the little Madonna, he declared, no, not he; and later on in the evening the crowd might get into an ugly temper again, when the *cure* was no longer by to restrain them, and harm might be done—the inn wrecked.

So let the white motor take the Englishmen away—away from Pontier—and as quickly as might be.

Mowbray growled defiance. He would not leave Pontier, he swore, till he chose to, and he would take his own time about leaving—stay a week if he wanted to, and more. But he had to yield, after a while, to his friends' councils, for both young men assured him, with vehemence, that they did not intend to get their heads broken or be maltreated by an angry crowd, because he happened to be of a particularly mulish disposition.

They had their way in the end, and Mowbray gave a reluctant consent that the car should be brought out; so in less than an hour after the procession had passed by the inn, his great white motor went snorting and puffing down the street, tearing its wild way from Pontier town.

But George Mowbray swore sullenly to himself that he would return to Pontier that very night—motor back whilst his companions slept the sleep of the just. Yes, he would leave his motor outside the town and make his way stealthily towards the chapel, the grey stone chapel dedicated to the little Madonna, and he would steal the wooden image. He would carry it away with him in his motor, and then the laugh would be on his side—though it would be but an ugly laugh at best.

So he swore to himself as he drove the car on at a wild, furious pace, whilst his two friends watched him silently.

It was very dark in the chapel where the little Madonna had her shrine. The little Madonna had been put quietly into her niche after all the excitement of *mi-careme*, the offerings of the faithful at her feet, in the shape of long wreaths of faded flowers—flowers which still exhaled a faint, delicate fragrance.

A red lamp burnt at the foot of the shrine, and this faint glow of light guided George Mowbray through the darkness of the chapel to where she stood. Here was the little Madonna he had come to carry off in his strong arms, the plain, little, wooden image, with its brave smile and gaudy silk robes; and he smiled triumphantly as he found himself face to face with the image, for his plan had worked so beautifully.

He had deserted his motor a quarter of a mile from Pontier—left the car on the high road to take care of itself, and he had made his way quite easily into the chapel. He had merely had to break open a crazy old wooden door to effect an entrance, and to ease his conscience of the theft of the Madonna he intended leaving behind him banknotes to the amount of over sixty pounds.

Pontier town could afford to buy a brand-new wax image for that sum, he reflected. A smiling, shining Madonna—but he doubted if they would worship her with the fond superstition they had bestowed upon the little wooden image. She would be too new—too smiling—too fine.

He stared at the wooden Madonna, and the little Madonna stared back. The red lamp revealed each to each plainly, for all that it was so dark in the chapel—the shadows so deep—so profound—and the silence so intense—so still.

It was strange—very strange—but as George Mowbray looked at the Madonna he thought of his mother—the mother who had died when he was quite a little chap—barely six years old. The mother who had owned such cool, soft hands and the sweetest voice he had ever heard—a voice which sometimes sounded in his dreams. And how marvellous it was—how extraordinary—but surely those painted blue eyes of the little Madonna's had grown to have a curious likeness to his mother's eyes! They were so wistful and tender—so pure and kind. They beamed with the sacred light of mother love—they were the holiest eyes in all the world.

He dropped on his knees, and as he stared at the little Madonna her face seemed to change again, and this time he caught the faint, fleeting reflection of the smile of a girl at home—the girl, and he was going to tell her—the girl—that he loved her, when he returned to England—and he guessed—he was quite sure—what her answer would be.

How strange that the little Madonna had her smile, though—her faint, dreamy, virginal smile, which he would be almost afraid to kiss away from her lips, to brush with his own lips.

He held out his hands, raising them to the little Madonna as though in fervent supplication, and he fancied it was no longer a small wooden image he gazed at, but a woman—a woman who was mother to the whole world. He dreamed he was a child

again, and that his face was pressed against a cool, soft cheek.

He sobbed—low, passionate sobs. He understood now what the mystery of Faith means, and why men can see what they want to see. How mere wood can turn to living flesh and blood at the needs and dictates of the soul.

He was a long time on his knees. He hid his face in his hands, and it seemed to him that he was compassed about by a great tenderness, by all the passion of a woman's pity and love.

He was conscious of the presence of his mother. He was sure his hair stirred lightly on his forehead at the touch of her fingers, or was it all a dream—a strange, waking dream?

He could not tell, for when the dawn came—the wonderful pearly dawn—it was just a little wooden Madonna who smiled down on him. A little wooden Madonna, gay in her gaudy silk robes, and with bright painted eyes. But he bowed himself to the dust before he quitted her presence, and he left his tribute behind him.

The old *cure* smiled when he found some loose banknotes fluttering amongst the offerings of the faithful at the feet of the Madonna's shrine—fluttering amongst those wreaths of faded flowers which still exhaled faint perfume—and his smile was a beautiful thing to see.

"So the Englishmen came to the little Madonna, and all is forgotten and forgiven, eh?" The old man murmured the words slowly—happily—to himself; then he gazed up at the wooden image.

"Mother of all the world," he breathed, "pray for all your sons."

The little Madonna smiled—she was always smiling—she was motherhood itself.

La Belle Marie.

The maid looked out on the wind-swept sea

Where the spooindrill drove on the breath of the gale.

Oh, fair as a dusk red rose was she,

As she sought her lover's sail;

For she was the pride of the Norman Coast,

The flower of Normandie,

Who watched for the absent fisher host!

Alas, La Belle Marie!

La Belle Marie, La Belle Marie, there are many prayers in the litany;

There's one for the wedded and one for the free, and one for the brave men lost at sea.

Oh! gray are your eyes as the storm-swept lea, but where are your roses, Belle Marie?

Three nights wore on and three dawns broke dun,

And the maid still watched for a sign of the fleet.

Alas for the wedding-gown begun

And the girl-dreams, fair and sweet!

Alas for homes of the Norman Coast,

Alas for Normandie,

Alas for the absent fisher host,

Alas, La Belle Marie!

La Belle Marie, La Belle Marie, there are many beads in your rosary;

There's one for the wedded and one for the free, and one for the brave men lost at sea.

Oh! gray are your eyes as the storm-swept lea, but where is your lover, Belle Marie?

The fourth day broke in a sob of rain,

And a ship came in on the turn of the tide.

The heart of the maid beat warm again

As a boat's crew left the side;

For she was the pride of the Norman Coast,

The flower of Normandie,

The ship of the man she loved the most,

The tattered Belle Marie!

La Belle Marie, La Belle Marie, there are many beads in your rosary;

There's one for the wedded and one for the free, and one for the brave men lost at sea.

Oh! gray are your eyes as the storm-swept lea, and here is your lover, Belle Marie!

They laid him down at her feet stark dead,

And the maiden gave nor a sob nor a groan,

But into her lap she took his head,

And she sat as turned to stone.

Alas for the flower of the Norman Coast,

Alas for Normandie,

Alas for the man she loved the most,

Alas, La Belle Marie!

La Belle Marie, La Belle Marie, you shall hear the prayers in the litany;

There's one for the wedded and one for the free, and one for the brave men lost at sea!

And hark! Through the roar of the storm-wracked lea, the spades in the churchyard, Belle Marie!

—Frederick Truesdall, in Appleton's Magazine