

The

Little

Madonna

By Alice & Claude Hskew



“M^{ESSIEURS} will see the little Madonna if they wait long enough. The procession is timed to start at twelve. Yes, the little Madonna will pass down the long street. We shall all be blessed by her presence—she ushers in *mi-careme*.”

The landlord of the “Blue Jay,” the principal inn of the quaint, old-fashioned town of Pontier—a little French fishing town which hugged the sea and was situated in the Alpes Maritimes—rubbed his hands and smiled in bland, amiable fashion at the tall young Englishman who, with two other compatriots, had taken it into his head to honour Pontier with a visit.

The Englishmen had arrived in a large, white motor, and were obviously rich, careless, light-hearted youths, bent on getting the best they could out of life—prodigal with their money, and full of wild animal spirits; they had already startled the quiet folk who lived at Pontier by that flashing white motor. For few motors came to the little fishing town, and those that did savoured of magic and ungodliness to the townsfolk of Pontier—to the fishermen who were as unchangeable as the sea.

But Jules Carnac was a wise man in his generation, as befits the landlord of an inn, and he knew that those who travel in large white motors are rich, so he had housed the heavy car in his stables, and was entertaining the young Englishmen to the best of his ability, fervently hoping that they would take it into their heads to stay longer than a few more hours at the “Blue Jay”; perhaps, if the saints willed it, they might pass another night there—just one more night.

They had arrived so late—so very late on the preceding evening, and the young men and the car alike had been covered by fine dust—the white dust of the road—and now the eldest of the trio had only just made his appearance in the large, old-fashioned room where the aristocracy of Pontier were wont to congregate together in the evenings to smoke, drink thin red wine, and discuss matters of local interest.

A pleasant sanded parlour, the windows festooned with curling vine tendrils, a room wherein the sunrays stole, gilding the dark wainscot and heavy oaken beams.

“The little Madonna!” George Mowbray laughed. “Are you really keeping *mi-careme* here?” he cried. “But what has the Madonna to do with the carnival? Is there to be a carnival here to-day—a fete?”

He was a tall, healthy-looking youth, with a strong, over-determined face, sharp, grey eyes, and fair, almost flaxen, hair—the living incarnation of strength and decision.

A rich boy, the owner of great possessions, a young man who had all his life before him and intended to make something of it, a lad fired with ambition, but bitten—badly bitten—with the arrogant spirit of the age, and an avowed agnostic; yet, for all that, a true humanitarian, and, in his way, extremely kind-hearted.

He was racing over France in his motor, accompanied by two friends, who, like himself, had just left Oxford. One of his companions, Viscount Heron, was the heir to one of the finest estates in England, and would wear an earl’s coronet when his father died.

Heron presented a great contrast to Mowbray. He was dark and very slim, not too strong physically, but clever in his own way, and gifted with a certain power of oratory.

The other youth, Hugh Carteret by name, was the son of a poor country rector, and would have to work hard for his daily bread in the future. He aspired to a tutorship at some big public school, but Mowbray, who was extremely fond of Hugh, wanted

to make him his land agent instead—a post for which Carteret was not in the least suited, for he was far more the scholar than the farmer. He loved the lore of books better than the lore of the fields.

“Surely the little Madonna has a great deal to do with the carnival,” the bland, stout landlord answered, with another wave of his large hands, and sweep of his rotund body. “She rejoices in all harmless happiness—she smiles—she blesses. She is as sweet—our little Madonna—as honey mixed with wine, and she is carried in procession round the town before every fete begins. She is not large”—he spread his hands out—“her height is about two feet, but she is very blessed, all the same. She prevents the rain falling, and insures fine weather for the fete. When she comes there are no disturbances amongst the fisherfolk, no angry quarrels. The little Madonna sees to it that all is harmony. She does not like hard words and angry blows. She breathes peace.”

The landlord spoke with some enthusiasm, but George Mowbray burst into a peal of loud, derisive laughter.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “Do you mean to say you are as superstitious as that in Pontier, and can you really believe that a little wooden image, carried round the town in solemn state, will insure a fine day? Why, it’s like a return to the middle ages. It’s absolutely absurd.”

His hearty laughter brought his two friends down into the parlour, and both Lord Heron and Hugh Carteret stared in some surprise at the flushed, angry landlord, and their excited friend.

“What’s the joke?” asked Heron. “You seem hugely amused, George?” He lit a cigarette with languid fingers as he spoke. All his movements were neat and punctilious—almost feminine.

“Monsieur is pleased to laugh because I have told him about our little Madonna!” Jules, who had flushed a deep crimson, turned indignantly to the newcomers. “Monsieur does not believe in Madonna’s powers,” he continued. “Well, well—let him wait till he has seen her. He will think very differently then—very differently indeed.”

He bustled out of the room as he spoke, afraid of betraying the intense indignation that he felt, for, after all, good customers must not be offended, even though they dared to scoff at the little Madonna. Besides, she could take care of herself—the blessed image—there was that consolation!

“How pagan we still are!” Hugh Carteret spoke in low tones. “That man who has just gone out of the room,” he continued, “our worthy landlord, evidently firmly believes in the virtues of his Madonna. Just as the Greeks believed in the sublime merits of their household gods, and appealed to them for help, guidance, and protection. It is the pure triumph of faith over reason in both cases, of mind over matter.”

He spoke with more seriousness than his wont. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a great mop of red hair.

“My father would be hugely interested if he were here,” he went on. “I believe the old man has got a warm corner in his heart for saints and images, notwithstanding that he is a priest of the Church of England, and he would simply delight in the procession which is going to pass through Pontier in an hour’s time. I have heard all about it from the pretty little chambermaid, who is agog with excitement. After the little Madonna has been carried round the town, *mi-careme* begins with a vengeance. Shall we stay and see the fete, George? It seems almost a pity to miss the frolic, doesn’t it?”

“Stay? Of course we will stay,” answered Mowbray. “The motor shall lay up for a bit, poor old girl, and have a rest. I suppose we can buy con-

fetti, streamers, and all that in this out-of-the-way place. Anyway, we’ll help to paint the town red to-night; we’ll dance with the village girls, and have a high old time—the little Madonna approving.”

He said the last words rather mockingly, for George Mowbray fancied himself the sworn enemy to superstition of all sorts. He represented the new Oxford—superior, modern Oxford.

“It certainly is an extremely pretty sight, and one I wouldn’t have missed for a good deal.”

Viscount Heron spoke with some enthusiasm. He was leaning over the balcony of the little sitting-room, which the landlord of the “Blue Jay” had put at the disposition of the three friends, gazing at the long procession which was slowly winding its way up the wide street, and would presently pass in front of the inn.

The sun was shining brightly, and it was one of those dazzling mornings when the whole land rejoices in the breath of spring; and as to the townsfolk of Pontier, they appeared to be intoxicated by the mere joy of living. There was a smile on every face, the women chatted together like bright-plumaged birds, the girls went gay in their caps tied with wide ribbons, and the fishermen, who were keeping *mi-careme* as a holiday, and so had abstained to-day from casting their nets into the sea, kept pouring out into the town—brown, olive-skinned men, who knew the ways of the deep waters, and the way to a woman’s heart.

The crowd who lined the street on either side had been throwing confetti at each other in handfuls, and the three Englishmen, leaning over the vine-draped balcony, had amused themselves in the same way, selecting the prettiest girls to aim at, however, and trying to enlance the long paper streamers, which they kept throwing down, into the ribboned caps of the laughing, protesting peasant maidens.

But to-day was a day of license, and no exception was taken, for a spirit of intense delight appeared to animate the entire population of Pontier. They took their pleasure as frankly and as freely as children.

Yet, as the procession appeared in the distance, a curious spirit passed over the crowd. The girls ceased to laugh and chatter and the men to joke and make love. The older folk stopped laughing at each other’s stories, the very children grew hushed and observant. A singular and, in its way, a very beautiful calm spread over the crowd, and a low whisper passed from mouth to mouth:

“The little Madonna comes—the little Madonna!”

“Look at that!” exclaimed Mowbray, turning in disgust to his friends. “Did you ever see such an instance of ridiculous superstition? They are afraid to open their mouths, these poor people, just because a wooden image is passing. All the fun of the fair will be put a stop to till the procession has gone by.”

“Yes, the little Madonna keeps her people in good order,” Heron laughed as he spoke and shrugged his shoulders, glancing up the street at the approaching procession.

But Hugh Carteret glanced anxiously at Mowbray. A look which had come into the other’s face vaguely alarmed him. He knew it of old. He had seen it once before, when Mowbray had got into trouble up at Oxford with the authorities. He was afraid that his friend contemplated some rash action, and he touched him lightly on the shoulder.

“Don’t be an ass, George!” he whispered. “What are you thinking of doing? I can see there is some mischief up. Your face betrays you.”

Mowbray laughed.

“I am going to show the good people of Pontier,” he answered, “that the little Madonna is not an