

Apple Blossom in Brittany

By Ernest Dowson

I

IT was the feast of the Assumption in Ploumariel, at the hottest part of the afternoon. Benedict Campion, who had just assisted at vespers, in the little dove-cotted church—like everything else in Ploumariel, even vespers were said earlier than is the usage in towns—took up his station in the market-place to watch the procession pass by. The head of it was just then emerging into the Square: a long file of men from the neighbouring villages, bare-headed and chaunting, followed the crucifer. They were all clad in the picturesque garb of the Morbihan peasantry, and were many of them imposing, quite noble figures with their clear-cut Breton features, and their austere type of face. After them a troop of young girls, with white veils over their heads, carrying banners—children from the convent school of the Ursulines; and then, two and two in motley assemblage (peasant women with their white coifs walking with the wives and daughters of prosperous *bourgeois* in costumes more civilised but far less pictorial) half the inhabitants of Ploumariel—all, indeed, who had not, with Campion, preferred to be spectators, taking refuge from a broiling sun under the grateful shadow of the chest-

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nuts in the market-place. Last of all a muster of clergy, four or five strong, a small choir of bullet-headed boys, and the Curé of the parish himself, Monsieur Letêtre chaunting from his book, who brought up the rear.

Campion, leaning against his chestnut tree, watched them defile. Once a smile of recognition flashed across his face, which was answered by a girl in the procession. She just glanced from her book, and the smile with which she let her eyes rest upon him for a moment, before she dropped them, did not seem to detract from her devotional air. She was very young and slight—she might have been sixteen—and she had a singularly pretty face; her white dress was very simple, and her little straw hat, but both of these she wore with an air which at once set her apart from her companions, with their provincial finery and their rather commonplace charms. Campion's eyes followed the little figure until it was lost in the distance, disappearing with the procession down a by-street on its return journey to the church. And after they had all passed, the singing, the last verse of the "Ave Maris Stella," was borne across to him, through the still air, the voices of children pleasantly predominating. He put on his hat at last, and moved away; every now and then he exchanged a greeting with somebody—the communal doctor, the mayor; while here and there a woman explained him to her gossip in whispers as he passed, "It is the Englishman of Mademoiselle Marie-Ursule—it is M. le Curé's guest." It was to the dwelling of M. le Curé, indeed, that Campion now made his way. Five minutes' walk brought him to it; an unpretentious white house, lying back in its large garden, away from the dusty road. It was an untidy garden, rather useful than ornamental; a very little shade was offered by one incongruous plane-tree, under which a wooden table was placed and some chairs. After *déjeuner*, on those hot August days,

Campion

Campion and the Curé took their coffee here ; and in the evening it was here that they sat and talked while Mademoiselle Hortense, the Curé's sister, knitted, or appeared to knit, an interminable shawl ; the young girl, Marie-Ursule, placidly completing the quartet with her silent, felicitous smile of a convent-bred child, which seemed sometimes, at least to Campion, to be after all a finer mode of conversation. He threw himself down now on the bench, wondering when his hosts would have finished their devotions, and drew a book from his pocket as if he would read. But he did not open it, but sat for a long time holding it idly in his hand, and gazing out at the village, at the expanse of dark pine-covered hills, and at the one trenchant object in the foreground, the white façade of the convent of the Ursuline nuns. Once and again he smiled, as though his thoughts, which had wandered a long way, had fallen upon extraordinarily pleasant things. He was a man of barely forty, though he looked slightly older than his age : his little, peaked beard was grizzled, and a life spent in literature, and very studiously, had given him the scholar's premature stoop. He was not handsome, but, when he smiled, his smile was so pleasant that people credited him with good looks. It brought, moreover, such a light of youth into his eyes, as to suggest that if his avocations had unjustly aged his body, that had not been without its compensations—his soul had remained remarkably young. Altogether, he looked shrewd, kindly and successful, and he was all these things, while if there was also a certain sadness in his eyes—lines of lassitude about his mouth—this was an idiosyncrasy of his temperament, and hardly justified by his history, which had always been honourable and smooth. He was sitting in the same calm and presumably agreeable reverie, when the garden gate opened, and a girl—the young girl of the procession, fluttered towards him.

"Are you quite alone?" she asked brightly, seating herself at his side. "Has not Aunt Hortense come back?"

Campion shook his head, and she continued speaking in English, very correctly, but with a slight accent, which gave to her pretty young voice the last charm.

"I suppose she has gone to see *la mère Guémené*. She will not live another night they say. Ah! what a pity," she cried, clasping her hands; "to die on the Assumption—that is hard."

Campion smiled softly. "Dear child, when one's time comes, when one is old as that, the day does not matter much." Then he went on: "But how is it you are back; were you not going to your nuns?"

She hesitated a moment. "It is your last day, and I wanted to make tea for you. You have had no tea this year. Do you think I have forgotten how to make it, while you have been away, as I forget my English words?"

"It's I who am forgetting such an English habit," he protested. "But run away and make it, if you like. I am sure it will be very good."

She stood for a moment looking down at him, her fingers smoothing a little bunch of palest blue ribbons on her white dress. In spite of her youth, her brightness, the expression of her face in repose was serious and thoughtful, full of unconscious wistfulness. This, together with her placid manner, the manner of a child who has lived chiefly with old people and quiet nuns, made her beauty to Campion a peculiarly touching thing. Just then her eyes fell upon Campion's wide-awake, lying on the seat at his side, and travelled to his uncovered head. She uttered a protesting cry: "Are you not afraid of a *coup de soleil*? See—you are not fit to be a guardian if you can be so foolish as that. It is I who have to look after you." She took up the great grey hat and

set it daintily on his head ; then with a little laugh she disappeared into the house.

When *Campion* raised his head again, his eyes were smiling, and in the light of a sudden flush which just died out of it, his face looked almost young.

II

This girl, so foreign in her education and traditions, so foreign in the grace of her movements, in everything except the shade of her dark blue eyes, was the child of an English father ; and she was *Benedict* *Campion's* ward. This relation, which many persons found incongruous, had befallen naturally enough. Her father had been *Campion's* oldest and most familiar friend ; and when *Richard* *Heath's* romantic marriage had isolated him from so many others, from his family and from his native land, *Campion's* attachment to him had, if possible, only been increased. From his heart he had approved, had prophesied nothing but good of an alliance, which certainly, while it lasted, had been an wholly ideal relation. There had seemed no cloud on the horizon—and yet less than two years had seen the end of it. The birth of the child, *Marie-Ursule*, had been her mother's death ; and six months later, *Richard* *Heath*, dying less from any defined malady than because he lacked any longer the necessary motive to live, was laid by the side of his wife. The helpless child remained, in the guardianship of *Hortense*, her mother's sister, and elder by some ten years, who had already composed herself contentedly, as some women do, to the prospect of perpetual spinsterhood, and the care of her brother's house—an ecclesiastic just appointed curé of *Ploumariel*. And here, ever since, in this quiet corner of *Brittany*,
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in the tranquil custody of the priest and his sister, Marie-Ursule had grown up.

Campion's share in her guardianship had not been onerous, although it was necessarily maintained ; for the child had inherited, and what small property would come to her was in England, and in English funds. To Hortense Letêtre and her brother such responsibilities in an alien land were not for a moment to be entertained. And gradually, this connection, at first formal and impersonal, between Campion and the Breton presbytery, had developed into an intimacy, into a friendship singularly satisfying on both sides. Separate as their interests seemed, those of the French country-priest, and of the Englishman of letters, famous already in his own department, they had, nevertheless, much community of feeling apart from their common affection for a child. Now, for many years, he had been established in their good graces, so that it had become an habit with him to spend his holiday—it was often a very extended one—at Ploumariel ; while to the Letêtres, as well as to Marie-Ursule herself, this annual sojourn of Campion's had become the occasion of the year, the one event which pleasantly relieved the monotony of life in this remote village ; though that, too, was a not unpleasant routine. Insensibly Campion had come to find his chief pleasure in consideration of this child of an old friend, whose gradual growth beneath influences which seemed to him singularly exquisite and fine, he had watched so long ; whose future, now that her childhood, her schooldays at the convent had come to an end, threatened to occupy him with an anxiety more intimate than any which hitherto he had known. Marie-Ursule's future ! They had talked much of it that summer, the priest and the Englishman, who accompanied him in his long morning walks, through green lanes, and over white, dusty roads, and past fields perfumed with
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the pungently pleasant smell of the blood-red *sarrasin*, when he paid visits to the sick who lived on the outskirts of his scattered parish. Campion became aware then of an increasing difficulty in discussing this matter impersonally, in the impartial manner becoming a guardian. Odd thrills of jealousy stirred within him when he was asked to contemplate Marie-Ursule's possible suitors. And yet, it was with a very genuine surprise, at least for the moment, that he met the Curé's sudden pressing home of a more personal contingency—he took this freedom of an old friend with a shrewd twinkle in his eye, which suggested that all along this had been chiefly in his mind. "*Mon bon ami*, why should you not marry her yourself? That would please all of us so much." And he insisted, with kindly insistence, on the propriety of the thing: dwelling on Campion's established position, their long habit of friendship, his own and his sister's confidence and esteem, taking for granted, with that sure insight which is the gift of many women and of most priests, that on the ground of affection alone the justification was too obvious to be pressed. And he finished with a smile, stopping to take a pinch of snuff with a sigh of relief—the relief of a man who has at least seasonably unburdened himself.

"Surely, *mon ami*, some such possibility must have been in your mind?"

Campion hesitated for a moment; then he proffered his hand, which the other warmly grasped. "You read me aright," he said slowly, "only I hardly realised it before. Even now—no, how can I believe it possible—that she should care for me. *Non sum dignus, non sum dignus*. Consider her youth, her inexperience; the best part of my life is behind me."

But the Curé smiled reassuringly. "The best part is before you, Campion; you have the heart of a boy. Do we not know you?"

you? And for the child—rest tranquil there! I have the word of my sister, who is a wise woman, that she is sincerely attached to you; not to speak of the evidence of my own eyes. She will be seventeen shortly, then she can speak for herself. And to whom else can we trust her?”

The shadow of these confidences hung over Campion when he next saw Marie-Ursule, and troubled him vaguely during the remainder of his visit, which this year, indeed, he considerably curtailed. Inevitably he was thrown much with the young girl, and if daily the charm which he found in her presence was sensibly increased, as he studied her from a fresh point of view, he was none the less disquieted at the part which he might be called upon to play. Diffident and scrupulous, a shy man, knowing little of women; and at least by temperament, a sad man, he trembled before felicity, as many at the palpable breath of misfortune. And his difficulty was increased by the conviction, forced upon him irresistibly, little as he could accuse himself of vanity, that the decision rested with himself. Her liking for him was genuine and deep, her confidence implicit. He had but to ask her and she would place her hand in his and go forth with him, as trustfully as a child. And when they came to celebrate her *fête*, Marie-Ursule's seventeenth birthday—it occurred a little before the Assumption—it was almost disinterestedly that he had determined upon his course. At least it was security which he could promise her, as a younger man might not; a constant and single-minded kindness; a devotion not the less valuable, because it was mature and reticent, lacking, perhaps, the jealous ardours of youth. Nevertheless, he was going back to England without having revealed himself; there should be no unseasonable haste in the matter; he would give her another year. The Curé smiled deprecatingly at the procrastination; but on this point Campion

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was firm. And on this, his last evening, he spoke only of trivial things to Marie-Ursule, as they sat presently over the tea—a mild and flavourless beverage—which the young girl had prepared. Yet he noticed later, after their early supper, when she strolled up with him to the hill overlooking the village, a certain new shyness in her manner, a shadow, half timid, half expectant in her clear eyes which permitted him to believe that she was partly prepared. When they reached the summit, stood clear of the pine trees by an ancient stone Calvary, Ploumariel lay below them, very fair in the light of the setting sun ; and they stopped to rest themselves, to admire.

“Ploumariel is very beautiful,” said Campion after a while. “Ah ! Marie-Ursule, you are fortunate to be here.”

“Yes.” She accepted his statement simply, then suddenly : “You should not go away.” He smiled, his eyes turning from the village in the valley to rest upon her face : after all, she was the daintiest picture, and Ploumariel with its tall slate roofs, its sleeping houses, her appropriate frame.

“I shall come back, I shall come back,” he murmured. She had gathered a bunch of ruddy heather as they walked, and her fingers played with it now nervously. Campion stretched out his hand for it. She gave it him without a word.

“I will take it with me to London,” he said ; “I will have Morbihan in my rooms.”

“It will remind you—make you think of us sometimes ?”

For answer he could only touch her hand lightly with his lips. “Do you think that was necessary ?” And they resumed their homeward way silently, although to both of them the air seemed heavy with unspoken words.

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III

When he was in London—and it was in London that for nine months out of the twelve Benedict Campion was to be found—he lived in the Temple, at the top of Hare Court, in the very same rooms in which he had installed himself, years ago, when he gave up his Oxford fellowship, electing to follow the profession of letters. Returning there from Ploumariel, he resumed at once, easily, his old avocations. He had always been a secluded man, living chiefly in books and in the past ; but this year he seemed less than ever inclined to knock at the hospitable doors which were open to him. For in spite of his reserve, his diffidence, Campion's success might have been social, had he cared for it, and not purely academic. His had come to be a name in letters, in the higher paths of criticism ; and he had made no enemies. To his success indeed, gradual and quiet as this was, he had never grown quite accustomed, contrasting the little he had actually achieved with all that he had desired to do. His original work was of the slightest, and a book that was in his head he had never found time to write. His name was known in other ways, as a man of ripe knowledge, of impeccable taste ; as a born editor of choice reprints, of inaccessible classics : above all, as an authority—the greatest, upon the literature and the life (its flavour at once courtly, and mystical, had to him an unique charm) of the seventeenth century. His heart was in that age, and from much lingering over it, he had come to view modern life with a curious detachment, a sense of remote hostility : Democracy, the Salvation Army, the novels of M. Zola—he disliked them all impartially. A Catholic by long inheritance, he held his religion for something more than an heirloom ;

heirloom ; he exhaled it, like an intimate quality ; his mind being essentially of that kind to which a mystical view of things comes easiest.

This year passed with him much as any other of the last ten years had passed ; at least the routine of his daily existence admitted little outward change. And yet inwardly, he was conscious of alteration, of a certain quiet illumination which was a new thing to him.

Although at Ploumariel when the prospect of such a marriage had dawned on him, his first impression had been one of strangeness, he could reflect now that it was some such possibility as this which he had always kept vaguely in view. He had prided himself upon few things more than his patience ; and now it appeared that this was to be rewarded ; he was glad that he had known how to wait. This girl, Marie-Ursule, had an immense personal charm for him, but, beyond that, she was representative—her traditions were exactly those which the ideal girl of *Campion's* imagination would possess. She was not only personally adorable ; she was also generically of the type which he admired. It was possibly because this type was, after all, so rare, that looking back, *Campion* in his middle age, could drag out of the recesses of his memory no spectre to compete with her. She was his first love precisely because the conditions, so choice and admirable, which rendered it inevitable for him to love her, had never occurred before. And he could watch the time of his probation gliding away with a pleased expectancy which contained no alloy of impatience. An illumination—a quite tranquil illumination : yes, it was under some such figure, without heart-burning, or adolescent fever, that love as it came to *Campion* was best expressed. Yet if this love was lucent rather than turbulent, that it was also deep he could remind himself, when a letter from the priest, while the spring was yet young, had sent him to Brittany, a month
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or two before his accustomed time, with an anxiety that was not solely due to bewilderment.

"Our child is well, *mon bon*," so he wrote. "*Do not alarm yourself. But it will be good for you to come, if it be only because of an idea she has, that you may remove. An idea! Call it rather a fancy—at least your coming will dispel it. Petites entêtées: I have no patience with these mystical little girls.*"

His musings on the phrase, with its interpretation varying to his mood, lengthened his long sea-passage, and the interminable leagues of railway which separated him from Pontivy, whence he had still some twenty miles to travel by the *Courrier*, before he reached his destination. But at Pontivy, the round, ruddy face of M. Letêtre greeting him on the platform dispelled any serious misgiving. Outside the post-office the familiar conveyance awaited them: its yellow inscription "Pontivy-Ploumarie!" touched Campion electrically, as did the cheery greeting of the driver, which was that of an old friend. They shared the interior of the rusty trap—a fossil among vehicles—they chanced to be the only travellers, and to the accompaniment of jingling harness, and the clattering hoofs of the brisk little Carhaix horses, M. Letêtre explained himself.

"A vocation, *mon Dieu!* if all the little girls who fancied themselves with one, were to have their way, to whom would our poor France look for children? They are good women, *nos Ursulines*, ah, yes; but our Marie-Ursule is a good child, and blessed matrimony also is a sacrament. You shall talk to her, my Campion. It is a little fancy, you see, such as will come to young girls; a convent agree, but when she sees you" . . . He took snuff with emphasis, and flipped his broad fingers suggestively. "*Craque!* it is a betrothal, and a *trousseau*, and not the habit of religion, that Mademoiselle is full of. You will talk to her?"

Campion

Campion assented silently, absently, his eyes had wandered away, and looked through the little square of window at the sad-coloured Breton country, at the rows of tall poplars, which guarded the miles of dusty road like sombre sentinels. And the priest with a reassured air pulled out his breviary, and began to say his office in an imperceptible undertone. After a while he crossed himself, shut the book, and pillowing his head against the hot, shiny leather of the carriage, sought repose; very soon his regular, stertorous breathing, assured his companion that he was asleep. Campion closed his eyes also, not indeed in search of slumber, though he was travel weary; rather the better to isolate himself with the perplexity of his own thoughts. An indefinable sadness invaded him, and he could envy the priest's simple logic, which gave such short shrift to obstacles that Campion, with his subtle melancholy, which made life to him almost morbidly an affair of fine shades and nice distinctions, might easily exaggerate.

Of the two, perhaps the priest had really the more secular mind, as it certainly excelled Campion's in that practical wisdom, or common sense, which may be of more avail than subtlety in the mere economy of life. And what to the Curé was a simple matter enough, the removal of the idle fancy of a girl, might be to Campion, in his scrupulous temper, and his overweening tenderness towards just those pieties and renunciations which such a fancy implied, a task to be undertaken hardly with relish, perhaps without any real conviction, deeply as his personal wishes might be implicated in success. And the heart had gone out of his journey long before a turn of the road brought them in sight of Ploumariel.

IV

Up by the great, stone Calvary, where they had climbed nearly a year before, Campion stood, his face deliberately averted, while the young girl uttered her hesitating confidences ; hesitating, yet candid, with a candour which seemed to separate him from the child by more than a measurable space of years, to set him with an appealing trustfulness in the seat of judgment—for him, for her. They had wandered there insensibly, through apple-orchards white with the promise of a bountiful harvest, and up the pine-clad hill, talking of little things—trifles to beguile their way—perhaps, in a sort of vain procrastination. Once, Marie-Ursule had plucked a branch of the snowy blossom, and he had playfully chided her that the cider would be less by a *litre* that year in Brittany. “But the blossom is so much prettier,” she protested ; “and there will be apples and apples—always enough apples. But I like the blossom best—and it is so soon over.”

And then, emerging clear of the trees, with Ploumariel lying in its quietude in the serene sunshine below them, a sudden strenuousness had supervened, and the girl had unburdened herself, speaking tremulously, quickly, in an undertone almost passionate ; and Campion, perforce, had listened. . . . A fancy ? a whim ? Yes, he reflected ; to the normal, entirely healthy mind, any choice of exceptional conditions, any special self-consecration or withdrawal from the common lot of men and women must draw down upon it some such reproach, seeming the mere pedantry of inexperience. Yet, against his reason, and what he would fain call his better judgment, something in his heart of hearts stirred sympathetically with this notion of the girl. And it was no fixed resolution, no deliberate

deliberate justification which she pleaded. She was soft, and pliable, and even her plea for renunciation contained pretty, feminine inconsequences; and it touched Campion strangely. Argument he could have met with argument; an ardent conviction he might have assailed with pleading; but that note of appeal in her pathetic young voice, for advice, for sympathy, disarmed him.

"Yet the world," he protested at last, but half-heartedly, with a sense of self-impotence: "the world, Marie-Ursule, it has its disappointments; but there are compensations."

"I am afraid, afraid," she murmured.

Their eyes alike sought instinctively the Convent of the Ursulines, white and sequestered in the valley—a visible symbol of security, of peace, perhaps of happiness.

"Even there they have their bad days: do not doubt it."

"But nothing happens," she said simply; "one day is like another. They can never be very sad, you know."

They were silent for a time: the girl, shading her eyes with one small white hand, continued to regard the convent; and Campion considered her fondly.

"What can I say?" he exclaimed at last. "What would you put on me? Your uncle—he is a priest—surely the most natural adviser—you know his wishes."

She shook her head. "With him it is different—I am one of his family—he is not a priest for me. And he considers me a little girl—and yet I am old enough to marry. Many young girls have had a vocation before my age. Ah, help me, decide for me!" she pleaded; "you are my *tuteur*."

"And a very old friend, Marie-Ursule." He smiled rather sadly. Last year seemed so long ago, and the word, which he had almost spoken then, was no longer seasonable. A note in his voice,

voice, inexplicable, might have touched her. She took his hand impulsively, but he withdrew it quickly, as though her touch had scalded him.

“You look very tired; you are not used to our Breton rambles in this sun. See, I will run down to the cottage by the chapel and fetch you some milk. Then you shall tell me.”

When he was alone the smile faded from his face and was succeeded by a look of lassitude, as he sat himself beneath the shadow of the Calvary to wrestle with his responsibility. Perhaps it was a vocation: the phrase, sounding strangely on modern ears, to him, at least, was no anachronism. Women of his race, from generation to generation, had heard some such voice and had obeyed it. That it went unheeded now was, perhaps, less a proof that it was silent, than that people had grown hard and deaf, in a world that had deteriorated. Certainly the convent had to him no vulgar, Protestant significance, to be combated for its intrinsic barbarism; it suggested nothing cold nor narrow nor mean, was veritably a gracious choice, a generous effort after perfection. Then it was for his own sake, on an egoistic impulse, that he should dissuade her? And it rested with him; he had no doubt that he could mould her, even yet, to his purpose. The child! how he loved her. . . . But would it ever be quite the same with them after that morning? Or must there be henceforth a shadow between them; the knowledge of something missed, of the lower end pursued, the higher slighted? Yet, if she loved him? He let his head drop on his hands, murmured aloud at the hard chance which made him at once judge and advocate in his own cause. He was not conscious of praying, but his mind fell into that condition of aching blankness which is, perhaps, an extreme prayer. Presently he looked down again at Ploumariel, with its coronal of faint smoke ascending in the
perfectly

perfectly still air, at the white convent of the Dames Ursulines, which seemed to dominate and protect it. How peaceful it was! And his thought wandered to London: to its bustle and noise, its squalid streets, to his life there, to its literary coteries, its politics, its society; vulgar and trivial and sordid they all seemed from this point of vantage. That was the world he had pleaded for, and it was into that he would bring the child. . . . And suddenly, with a strange reaction, he was seized with a sense of the wisdom of her choice, its pictorial fitness, its benefit for both of them. He felt at once and finally, that he acquiesced in it; that any other ending to his love had been an impossible grossness, and that to lose her in just that fashion was the only way in which he could keep her always. And his acquiescence was without bitterness, and attended only by that indefinable sadness which to a man of his temper was but the last refinement of pleasure. He had renounced, but he had triumphed; for it seemed to him that his renunciation would be an ægis to him always against the sordid facts of life, a protest against the vulgarity of instinct, the tyranny of institutions. And he thought of the girl's life, as it should be, with a tender appreciation—as of something precious laid away in lavender. He looked up to find her waiting before him with a basin half full of milk, warm still, fresh from the cow; and she watched him in silence while he drank. Then their eyes met, and she gave a little cry.

“You will help me? Ah, I see that you will! And you think I am right?”

“I think you are right, Marie-Ursule.”

“And you will persuade my uncle?”

“I will persuade him.”

She took his hand in silence, and they stood so for a minute, gravely regarding each other. Then they prepared to descend.