

White Magic

By Ella D'Arcy

I SPENT one evening last summer with my friend Mauger, *pharmacien* in the little town of Jacques-le-Port. He pronounces his name Major, by-the-bye, it being a quaint custom of the Islands to write proper names one way and speak them another, thus serving to bolster up that old, old story of the German savant's account of the difficulties of the English language—"where you spell a man's name Verulam," says he reproachfully, "and pronounce it Bacon."

Mauger and I sat in the pleasant wood-panelled parlour behind the shop, from whence all sorts of aromatic odours found their way in through the closed door to mingle with the fragrance of figs, Ceylon tea, and hot *gôches-à-beurre*, constituting the excellent meal spread before us. The large old-fashioned windows were wide open, and I looked straight out upon the harbour, filled with holiday yachts, and the wonderful azure sea.

Over against the other islands, opposite, a gleam of white streaked the water, white clouds hung motionless in the blue sky, and a tiny boat with white sails passed out round Falla Point. A white butterfly entered the room to flicker in gay uncertain curves above the cloth, and a warm reflected light played over the slender rat-tailed forks and spoons, and raised by a tone or two the colour
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of Mauger's tanned face and yellow beard. For, in spite of a sedentary profession, his preferences lie with an out-of-door life, and he takes an afternoon off whenever practicable, as he had done that day, to follow his favourite pursuit over the golf-links at Les Landes.

While he had been deep in the mysteries of teeing and putting, with no subtler problem to be solved than the judicious selection of mashie and cleek, I had explored some of the curious cromlechs or *pouquelays* scattered over this part of the island, and my thoughts and speech harked back irresistibly to the strange old religions and usages of the past.

"Science is all very well in its way," said I; "and of course it's an inestimable advantage to inhabit this so-called nineteenth century; but the mediæval want of science was far more picturesque. The once universal belief in charms and portents, in wandering saints, and fighting fairies, must have lent an interest to life which these prosaic days sadly lack. Madelon then would steal from her bed on moonlight nights in May, and slip across the dewy grass with naked feet, to seek the reflection of her future husband's face in the first running stream she passed; now, Miss Mary Jones puts on her bonnet and steps round the corner, on no more romantic errand than the investment of her month's wages in the savings bank at two and a half per cent."

Mauger laughed. "I wish she did anything half so prudent! That has not been my experience of the Mary Joneses."

"Well, anyhow," I insisted, "the Board school has rationalised them. It has pulled up the innate poetry of their nature to replace it by decimal fractions."

To which Mauger answered "Rot!" and offered me his cigarette-case. After the first few silent whiffs, he went on as follows: "The innate poetry of Woman! Confess now, there is

no more unpoetic creature under the sun. Offer her the sublimest poetry ever written and the *Daily Telegraph's* latest article on fashions, or a good sound murder or reliable divorce, and there's no betting on her choice, for it's a dead certainty. Many men have a love of poetry, but I'm inclined to think that a hundred women out of ninety-nine positively dislike it."

Which struck me as true. "We'll drop the poetry, then," I answered; "but my point remains, that if the girl of to-day has no superstitions, the girl of to-morrow will have no beliefs. Teach her to sit down thirteen to table, to spill the salt, and walk under a ladder with equanimity, and you open the door for Spencer and Huxley, and—and all the rest of it," said I, coming to an impotent conclusion.

"Oh, if superstition were the salvation of woman—but you are thinking of young ladies in London, I suppose? Here, in the Islands, I can show you as much superstition as you please. I'm not sure that the country-people in their heart of hearts don't still worship the old gods of the *pouquelayes*. You would not, of course, find any one to own up to it, or to betray the least glimmer of an idea as to your meaning, were you to question him, for ours is a shrewd folk, wearing their orthodoxy bravely; but possibly the old beliefs are cherished with the more ardour for not being openly avowed. Now you like bits of actuality. I'll give you one, and a proof, too, that the modern maiden is still separated by many a fathom of salt sea-water from these fortunate isles.

"Some time ago, on a market morning, a girl came into the shop, and asked for some blood from a dragon. 'Some what?' said I, not catching her words. 'Well, just a little blood from a dragon,' she answered very tremulously, and blushing. She meant of course, 'dragon's blood,' a resinous powder, formerly much used in medicine, though out of fashion now.

“She was a pretty young creature, with pink cheeks and dark eyes, and a forlorn expression of countenance which didn’t seem at all to fit in with her blooming health. Not from the town, or I should have known her face; evidently come from one of the country parishes to sell her butter and eggs. I was interested to discover what she wanted the ‘dragon’s blood’ for, and after a certain amount of hesitation she told me. ‘They do say it’s good, sir, if anything should have happened betwixt you an’ your young man.’ ‘Then you have a young man?’ said I. ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘And you’ve fallen out with him?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ And tears rose to her eyes at the admission, while her mouth rounded with awe at my amazing perspicacity. ‘And you mean to send him some dragon’s blood as a love potion?’ ‘No, sir; you’ve got to mix it with water you’ve fetched from the Three Sisters’ Well, and drink it yourself in nine sips on nine nights running, and get into bed without once looking in the glass, and then if you’ve done everything properly, and haven’t made any mistake, he’ll come back to you, an’ love you twice as much as before.’ ‘And la mère Todevinn (Tostevin) gave you that precious recipe, and made you cross her hand with silver into the bargain,’ said I severely; on which the tears began to flow outright.

“You know the old lady,” said Mauger, breaking off his narration, “who lives in the curious stone house at the corner of the market-place? A reputed witch who learned both black and white magic from her mother, who was a daughter of Hélier Mouton, the famous sorcerer of Cakeuro. I could tell you some funny stories relating to la Mère Todevinn, who numbers more clients among the officers and fine ladies here than in any other class; and very curious, too, is the history of that stone house, with the Brancourt arms still sculptured on the side. You can see them, if you turn down by the Water-gate. This old sinister-looking building,

building, or rather portion of a building, for more modern houses have been built over the greater portion of the site, and now press upon it from either hand, once belonged to one of the finest mansions in the islands, but through a curse and a crime has been brought down to its present condition; while the Brancourt family have long since been utterly extinct. But all this isn't the story of Elsie Mahy, which turned out to be the name of my little customer.

"The Mahys are of the Vauvert parish, and Pierre Jean, the father of this girl, began life as a day-labourer, took to tomato-growing on borrowed capital, and now owns a dozen glass-houses of his own. Mrs. Mahy does some dairy-farming on a minute scale, the profits of which she and Miss Elsie share as pin-money. The young man who is courting Elsie is a son of Toumes the builder. He probably had something to do with the putting up of Mahy's greenhouses, but anyhow, he has been constantly over at Vauvert during the last six months, superintending the alterations at de C aterelle's place.

"Toumes, it would seem, is a devoted but imperious lover, and the Persian and Median laws are as butter compared with the inflexibility of his decisions. The little rift within the lute, which has lately turned all the music to discord, occurred last Monday week—bank-holiday, as you may remember. The Sunday school to which Elsie belongs—and it's a strange anomaly, isn't it, that a girl going to Sunday school should still have a rooted belief in white magic?—the school was to go for an outing to Prawn Bay, and Toumes had arranged to join his sweetheart at the starting-point. But he had made her promise that if by any chance he should be delayed, she would not go with the others, but would wait until he came to fetch her.

"Of course, it so happened that he was detained, and, equally of course,

course, Elsie, like a true woman, went off without him. She did all she knew to make me believe she went quite against her own wishes, that her companions forced her to go. The beautifully yielding nature of a woman never comes out so conspicuously as when she is being coerced into following her own secret desires. Anyhow, Toumes, arriving some time later, found her gone. He followed on, and under ordinary circumstances, I suppose, a sharp reprimand would have been considered sufficient. Unfortunately, the young man arrived on the scene to find his truant love deep in the frolics of kiss-in-the-ring. After tea in the C aterelle Arms, the whole party had adjourned to a neighbouring meadow, and were thus whiling away the time to the exhilarating strains of a French horn and a concertina. Elsie was led into the centre of the ring by various country bumpkins, and kissed beneath the eyes of heaven, of her neighbours, and of her embittered swain.

“You may have been amongst us long enough to know that the Toumes family are of a higher social grade than the Mahys, and I suppose the Misses Toumes never in their lives stooped to anything so ungentle as public kiss-in-the-ring. It was not surprising, therefore, to hear that after this incident ‘me an’ my young man had words,’ as Elsie put it.

“Note,” said Mauger, “the descriptive truth of this expression ‘having words.’ Among the unlettered, lovers only do have words when vexed. At other times they will sit holding hands throughout a long summer’s afternoon, and not exchange two remarks an hour. Love seals their tongue; anger alone unlooses it, and, naturally, when unloosened, it runs on, from sheer want of practice, a great deal faster and farther than they desire.

“So, life being thorny and youth being vain, they parted late that same evening, with the understanding that they would meet no more; and to be wroth with one we love worked its usual
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harrowing effects. Toumes took to billiards and brandy, Elsie to tears and invocations of Beelzebub ; then came Mère Todevinn's recipe, my own more powerful potion, and now once more all is silence and balmy peace."

"Do you mean to tell me you sold the child a charm, and didn't enlighten her as to its futility?"

"I sold her some bicarbonate of soda worth a couple of *doubles*, and charged her five shillings for it into the bargain," said Mauger unblushingly. "A wrinkle I learned from once over-hearing an old lady I had treated for nothing expatiating to a crony, 'Eh, but, my good, my good! dat Mr. Major, I don't t'ink much of him. He give away his add-vice an' his meddecines for nuddin. Dey not wort nuddin' neider, for sure.' So I made Elsie hand me over five British shillings, and gave her the powder, and told her to drink it with her meals. But I threw in another prescription, which, if less important, must nevertheless be punctiliously carried out, if the charm was to have any effect. 'The very next time,' I told her, 'that you meet your young man in the street, walk straight up to him without looking to the right or to the left, and hold out your hand, saying these words: "Please, I so want to be friends again!" Then if you've been a good girl, have taken the powder regularly, and not forgotten one of my directions, you'll find that all will come right.'

"Now, little as you may credit it," said Mauger, smiling, "the charm worked, for all that we live in the so-called nineteenth century. Elsie came into the shop only yesterday to tell me the results, and to thank me very prettily. 'I shall always come to you now, sir,' she was good enough to say, 'I mean, if anything was to go wrong again. You know a great deal more than Mère Todevinn, I'm sure.' 'Yes, I'm a famous sorcerer,' said I, 'but you had better not speak about the powder. You are wise enough

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to see that it was just your own conduct in meeting your young man rather more than halfway, that did the trick—eh?’ She looked at me with eyes brimming over with wisdom. ‘You needn’t be afraid, sir, I’ll not speak of it. Mère Todevinn always made me promise to keep silence too. But of course I know it was the powder that worked the charm.’

“And to that belief the dear creature will stick to the last day of her life. Women are wonderful enigmas. Explain to them that tight-lacing displaces all the internal organs, and show them diagrams to illustrate your point, they smile sweetly, say, ‘Oh, how funny!’ and go out to buy their new stays half an inch smaller than their old ones. But tell them they must never pass a pin in the street for luck’s sake, if it lies with its point towards them, and they will sedulously look for and pick up every such confounded pin they see. Talk to a woman of the marvels of science, and she turns a deaf ear, or refuses point-blank to believe you; yet she is absolutely all ear for any old wife’s tale, drinks it greedily in, and never loses hold of it for the rest of her days.”

“But does she?” said I; “that’s the point in dispute, and though your story shows there’s still a commendable amount of superstition in the Islands, I’m afraid if you were to come to London, you would not find sufficient to cover a threepenny-piece.”

“Woman is woman all the world over,” said Mauger sententiously, “no matter what mental garb happens to be in fashion at the time. *Grattez la femme et vous trouvez la folle*. For see here: if I had said to Mademoiselle Elsie, ‘Well, you were in the wrong; it’s your place to take the first step towards reconciliation,’ she would have laughed in my face, or flung out of the shop in a rage. But because I sold her a little humbugging powder under the
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guise of a charm, she submitted herself with the docility of a pet lambkin. No ; one need never hope to prevail through wisdom with a woman, and if I could have realised that ten years ago, it would have been better for me."

He fell silent, thinking of his past, which to me, who knew it, seemed almost an excuse for his cynicism. I sought a change of idea. The splendour of the pageant outside supplied me with one.

The sun had set ; and all the eastern world of sky and water, stretching before us, was steeped in the glories of the after-glow. The ripples seemed painted in dabs of metallic gold upon a surface of polished blue-grey steel. Over the islands opposite hung a far-reaching golden cloud, with faint-drawn, up-curled edges, as though thinned out upon the sky by some monster brush ; and while I watched it, this cloud changed from gold to rose-colour, and instantly the steel mirror of the sea glowed rosy too, and was streaked and shaded with a wonderful rosy-brown. As the colour grew momentarily more intense in the sky above, so did the sea appear to pulse to a more vivid copperish-rose, until at last it was like nothing so much as a sea of flowing fire. And the cloud flamed fiery too, yet all the while its up-curled edges rested in exquisite contrast upon a background of most cool cerulean blue.

The little sailing-boat, which I had noticed an hour previously, reappeared from behind the Point. The sail was lowered as it entered the harbour, and the boatman took to his oars. I watched it creep over the glittering water until it vanished beneath the window-sill. I got up and went over to the window to hold it still in sight. It was sculled by a young man in rosy shirt-sleeves, and opposite to him, in the stern, sat a girl in a rosy gown.

So long as I had observed them, not one word had either spoken.

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In silence they had crossed the harbour, in silence the sculler had brought his craft alongside the landing-stage, and secured her to a ring in the stones. Still silent, he helped his companion to step out upon the quay.

“Here,” said I, to Mauger, “is a couple confirming your ‘silent’ theory with a vengeance. We must suppose that much love has rendered them absolutely dumb.”

He came, and leaned from the window too.

“It’s not *a* couple, but *the* couple,” said he ; “and after all, in spite of cheap jesting, there are some things more eloquent than speech.” For at this instant, finding themselves alone upon the jetty, the young man had taken the girl into his arms, and she had lifted a frank responsive mouth to return his kiss.

Five minutes later the sea had faded into dull greys and sober browns, starved white clouds moved dispiritedly over a vacant sky, and by cricking the back of my neck I was able to follow Toumes’ black coat and the white frock of Miss Elsie until they reached Poidevin’s wine-vaults, and, turning up the Water-gate, were lost to view.