

THEY SAY.

"They say" "Oh, well, suppose they do? But can they prove the story true? Why would you want to know the "they" who whisper what they dare not say? Suspicion may arise from naught. But malice, envy, want of thought.

THE WRONG MAN.

BY THE HON. MRS. A. MONTGOMERY. Author of "Mine Own Familiar Friend."

CHAPTER XI.—(CONTINUED.)

Madeline returned to the convent in an uneasy state of mind. It was impossible to imagine that this dying French soldier could have asked her to do for him, unless it were to write to his friends, and that the priest who had attended him was far more able to do than herself. The scene she had gone through had in itself been sufficiently emotional, and now a certain vague anxiety succeeded it. However, the suspense was soon to be put an end to by the arrival of the priest. He was shown into the parlour of the convent, and Madeline, pale and nervous, was summoned to meet him. He began by thanking her for her kindness to the poor sufferer, and then said:

"The commission he has given me is so vague that I hardly know how to convey it to you, and I can only hope that, when you hear it, you will be able to throw some light on the question; though, on the other hand, I am not unprepared to find that you may be unable to give any clue to the mystery involved in the poor fellow's confession. I must begin, Mademoiselle, by reminding you that all I shall say to you is exactly what the French soldier himself desired me to confide to you. He seemed to think that the remarkable coincidence of an English lady being sent to him in the last moments of his life was intended by Divine Providence to relieve his conscience of a heavy burden."

Madeline listened with great interest, she was waiting the good man would only come to the point without so much preamble. "It seems," resumed the reverend father, after refreshing himself with a pinch of snuff, and displaying, at the same time a voluminous brown cotton handkerchief, "that at some period of the young man's life he was laid under a deep obligation to a young Englishman. The poor fellow's account was a little confused, but I believe that, while bathing in the Rhine in company with some other young men, he was seized with cramp, and that the English man rescued him at considerable peril to himself. Some time after this occurrence, he had an offer from a commercial house in Berlin to go on a mission to England for him, in connection with some business, and he would necessarily pass through France on his way. But that time he had contracted the sort of friendship with the young Englishman that might exist between two men of the same age, though not so far as I can make out of quite the same social position. The Englishman was, for some reason or other, in a state of banishment from his own home. He seems to have opened his heart in a measure to the Frenchman whose life he had saved, and to have entrusted him with a letter addressed to his mother. But the more important part of the communication he had to make her, could not safely be conveyed in writing, and he had a verbal message to deliver, which, it appears, would have reinstated the Englishman in the esteem of his friends."

"Did he deliver the letter?" said Madeline, interrupting him. The father paused before answering her. It was struck by her pallor, and the contraction of her features. "I fear, Mademoiselle, your solicitude for the poor fellow, who I hope is now in peace, has been too much for you. You are doubtless, at your age, unaccustomed to such scenes."

"It is not that," said Madeline, quickly, "but do you know the Englishman's name? Let me see, I had great difficulty in catching it. Something like Airber, I think. Does Mademoiselle know such a person?" Madeline felt a choking in her throat as she replied: "There is no English name I know exactly like that. But did he deliver the letter?"

"Alas no, Mademoiselle, that is the point I am coming to. He took the letter and went to Paris. There he was detained by a variety of causes longer than he originally intended. You must remember that the letter without his verbal explanation of it was of no use; and that, moreover, he had promised the most sacred secrecy to Monsieur Airber. While in Paris, he received intelligence that his friend had enlisted in the Prussian army; for I must tell you that he passed for a Prussian, no one but our poor French soldier knowing him to be of English birth. The Frenchman remained in Paris till the war was about to be declared; and in the frenzy of Frenchmen at that time, he assured his friendship with the man who had saved his life, but who now saw his light being fighting against his country. Finally one night, when he and a number of young fellows like himself were dining at a cafe together, in a state of semi-intoxication, he told the story to his boon companions, and said aloud about of 'A Berlin a Berlin,' he burnt the letter, and followed his promise. Almost immediately after he was walking with a innkeeper at his back; and, as he probably told you, it was at Gravelotte he got his death wound. He had been some time in the hospital, miserably suffer-

ing all the incidents of his past life, and feeling how dreary it was to be dying without a friend near him, and even without hearing the accents of his own native tongue. Then remorse seized him for his faithlessness to his friend. But it was not until you came to him, Mademoiselle, and told him you were English, and asked him whether he would not see a priest, that he made up his mind to make his confession and really prepare for death."

Madeline was much overcome. A variety of conflicting emotions choked her utterance. Could the young Englishman be Frederick Herbert? for she was too conversant with French not to know that the pronunciation given by the French soldier and the German priest was just what they might be expected to use in speaking of the companion of her early life. At the same time the whole matter was so involved in mystery that she was afraid of compromising herself or others by entering into any explanation with the priest.

"I do not see what I can do in the matter," she said, in a doubtful voice, as if speaking to herself. "Do not despair, my dear young lady," replied the kind-hearted man, eagerly. "I am quite of the same opinion as the poor soldier. I believe God brought you here that you might exonerate the young Englishman before his friends, and that you might make up for his ungrateful omission. Depend upon it, good will come out of this curious combination of circumstances. Already you have been the means of inducing that poor fellow to receive the last sacraments; the rest will follow."

"Did you learn his name, also, reverend father? For that may be of consequence in any attempt to find the Englishman."

"No; it is very extraordinary, that entirely escaped me. Did he not tell you?"

"No; I never asked him. I asked if I should write to any of his family, but he shook his head, thanked me, and declined."

"He told me," resumed the Father, "that he was an orphan, and had no relations."

"How very unfortunate! And Mademoiselle Sophie Theine did not know he was only known in the hospital by the number at the head of his bed?"

"Oh! poor fellow! What a consolation it is to believe that there is one who knows us and cares for us as individuals, and not as units in a regiment or numbers in a sick ward. There is nothing so dreary to think of as the cataloguing of human souls in the numbering of human sufferers. Happily there is one who knows all minutely."

He rose to take his leave, and Madeline promised she would think over all he had told her; and "I need not add," she said, "if ever I find the clue to the Englishman's family, I will do my best to tell them that the soldier had a mission to them, and was the bearer of a letter. And yet what good can it do? I murmured she to herself, as the priest closed the door after him and she was left alone. Madeline pondered long and deeply on all that had occurred. It appeared to her imprudent to make any communication to Mrs. Herbert upon such a vague surmise as that afforded by the dying soldier's confession; moreover, it was quite possible that if Frederick really intended to convey any secret to his mother he had found other means of doing so. It seemed no business of hers to interfere in this terrible secret, and her doing so might even be more painful than consoling to Mrs. Herbert. She shrank from intruding into a sorrow which she had always considered as sealed to her, and glad as she would have been to soothe her grief, or give a ray of additional hope to the poor mother's heart, yet it was a delicate thing to open the question at all, unless she was sure of being the bearer of real and certain good tidings. Added to this, she was still a little sore at the way in which Frederick Herbert and his mysterious guilt were always brought before her. She had hardly recovered from the shock of being told that common gossip had all but married her to the man she had looked upon with secret abhorrence for so many years, and now here was the question turning up again, and that in a way which seemed to lay some obligation upon her, and to involve her in a difficult responsibility.

"That night she had but little sleep—her pulse beat fast and light; the ghostly face of the dying man haunted her dreams. It had been a face with no natural charm, and its paleness became hideous in death. At the time she had noticed this without feeling it, for all her thought and anxiety had been for the poor soul about to take its flight for eternity. But now in the long silent hours, with no break save the convent clock tolling at every quarter, and the distant sound of the railway rumbling through the stillness, and recalling painfully to her imagination the weary journey she had gone through, and the terrible moments those trucks full of cattle or heavy baggage, all the real unguished horrors of that death-bed came vividly before her. At any other time she would have dwelt chiefly on the thought of his having died in hope and resignation. But her nerves were overwrought, and the mystery of Frederick Herbert's fate excited and vexed her imagination.

"It was a great relief to her when the next morning she found that they were to leave Brussels on the following day. She was to go with the nuns to a house of their order there, until some other arrangement might be determined on. Madeline hoped to find letters from home waiting her. She had been delayed much longer on the route than she had anticipated, and as she passed through the war country could be but little relied on, she had begged them to write to Brussels. She had heard nothing from Camille for some time, and felt sure a letter from her must be lost. She hoped that Mademoiselle vonderblanc would write to stay with her, either till the Frideriks joined her, or her father came to such her. In a few more days she reached Brussels; only, however, to meet with disappointment. A letter from her father informed her that his business had increased, and that he hoped she would remain safely in the convent till his friends arrived from Switzerland, as he was not fit to state to travel. But it was a worse disappointment still to find that she had missed Camille vonderblanc, who had left Brussels three weeks previous."

CHAPTER XII.

The dark veil of a deep melancholy had fallen on Camille vonderblanc's unorganised brain. She was, perhaps, the only one in that desolate house and family who really mourned the death of his master, save the faithful servant who had attended his last moments. For about a month after her husband's death, Madame vonderblanc maintained, with tolerable propriety, the character of a widow. She received visits of condolence from all her friends, and wore very becoming mourning. But the visits paid over, she began to feel the monotony of existence, unalleviated by the possibility of going into society, or of receiving in her own house. To this dreary sentiment another was united of a more poignant nature, and which turned the heart of the unhappy woman into a well of bitterness. Her own fortune was a good one, but her daughter's was larger. She retained, on the death of her husband, the full enjoyment of all she had brought him on her marriage; but his own wealth he had bequeathed solely and entirely to Camille. The splendid house they lived in at Brussels was the daughter's and the mother only possessed a smaller house, which had belonged to her father, in a less fashionable part of the town, and which at that moment was empty. Every day seemed to increase the sense of her lowered position, and it was with a heart full of envy that she looked round her and calculated how this and that article of luxury and wealth was no longer hers, but Camille's.

Mademoiselle vonderblanc had borne the sorrows of her married life with a silent resignation, which the world thought cowardly and mean spirited; but she never forgot that once she had deeply loved the woman who had made his life miserable. He would say to the very few to whom he ever opened his heart on the subject, "I will be true to my own past. She was very beautiful when I fell in love with her. I loved her dearly, and was long in wooing her. I will never forget that, let her be what she may now."

"How very unfortunate! And Mademoiselle Sophie Theine did not know he was only known in the hospital by the number at the head of his bed?"

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"What does it matter," she would say, "whether this house be all yours or all mine since you wish of course, continue to live in it just as you have done? I do not want anything, my dear mother. Enjoy your life as before, and do so long as you live. I should never wish it otherwise."

"You are a child, Camille, to talk in that way, not to say full. How can you say I can live here as in the past, when say you may marry, and probably will marry, someone I detest, and who detests me, and who, the first thing he does, will notify to me that I had better go and live in my own house."

"And do you think, you silly child, I would consent to stop here on sufferance or accept your house out of charity? Do you imagine that Eugenie de Lafore, who brought your father a fortune that at that time nearly equalled his own, is going to be dependent upon his child, and to owe to her and her husband the roof she has over her head?"

"I think that I am your child, mother, at least as much as my father's; and that I cannot understand your having any sentiment of being under an obligation to your own child, not even were you, which you are not, and never can be, dependent upon me for everything. It is not in my power to alter the way in which my poor dear father has made his will. But as practically it need make little or no difference to you, and as I cannot understand your notion of being indebted to me, who owe you my existence, or of being humiliated, I can only repeat it, dear mother, use everything as if it were your own."

A murmuring reply that she was unpractical and silly, and then some peevish tears, was all that poor Camille gained by these well-intentioned protestations. Her mother would tell her, sobbing behind her broad-beamed cambric handkerchief, that she knew nothing of the world, and nothing of life, and that all she said was no more than the dream of a young girl; that a thing lent was never like a thing that was your own; that she never could have supposed her husband would have been so cruel as to leave that house away from her. It was but enough leaving her nothing but her own fortune, which she had a right to, and the remarkable disposition of his money already alluded to—but that to turn her out of the house in which they had passed all their married life, was an act of barbarity. When the conversation reached this point, Camille had always a great difficulty in remaining calm. She could bear a great deal from her mother especially; but she could not bear an attack on her father, or a word disparaging to his conduct.

She was always afraid she should say more than would be right from a daughter to a mother; and therefore, at this point she would get up and approach her mother, trying to say something kind, which had no reference to the subject in dispute, and then, pressing a kiss on her forehead, would leave the room, seeking this or that article of personal use that the longer she remained, the hysterical weeping continued and increased.

There was some truth in Madame vonderblanc's assertion that a thing lent is never like your own, as there is always some truth in the hard, literal, business-like assertion of selfish, matter-of-fact people. There is a rocky substratum in all questions of this nature which is very evident to people of Madame vonderblanc's character, and which lofty minds like Camille's try to ignore. Had she been capable of understanding and appreciating her daughter, it might have gone on very well. Each would have entered into the sentiments of the other with mutual generosity, and a system of give and take. But, precisely, Madame vonderblanc being what she was, the combination desired by Camille, and which she fancied so easily became an impossibility.

There was not an hour in the day that Madame vonderblanc was not drawing a silent comparison between what in the house was hers and what was Camille's. As she sat in her arm-chair, her eyes wandered over the room, seeking this or that article of furniture, which she remembered purchasing with her own money twenty years ago. That at least was hers. She could probably even show the bill she had paid, and got receipted for it. There might be some doubt concerning those hangings, which would next arrest her attention. The Count had been with her when she had selected the curtains, and now it would be hard to part with them. They would look so well in the drawing-room of her own house; they would match that beautiful paper she had put up for the gratification of her present tenant. She immediately recollected that the same idea had crossed her mind when she had bought them. Not that of course there then could have been any call for such a reflection; as in those happier days she had never supposed Monsieur vonderblanc would be guilty of such a grave injustice. No, indeed. Nevertheless she was sure it had occurred to her how well they would go with that new paper, had such a combination been required; and that, of course, at once proved that it was she who had purchased them, and not the Count. She never would have dreamt of mitching the Count's curtains with her paper—even mentally. They were her own, paid for with her own money; not a doubt of it.

This process of reasoning was going on incessantly, and when next she saw Camille it was repeated aloud to her. To do Camille justice, she never contradicted the conclusion her mother invariably arrived at, though she saw that, if it went on much longer, the result would be that the house would be left to her, with a small portion of bedroom furniture and kitchen utensils. Still it had occurred to her to retrace at this gradual absorption of all the personalities, till one day, in an ill-adviced moment, emboldened by her apparent success, she had suggested itself to Madame vonderblanc to see whether she could not also appropriate the pictures, and especially the six magnificent full-length family portraits we have already alluded to. She was just recovering from an attack of migraine (as she said), when this health-inspiring idea took hold of her imagination. Camille had brought her work into the boudoir, to sit; awhile with her mother, for since her father's death she had redoubled her attention to her sole remaining parent, and seemed bent upon winning her affection, if she had any to bestow. The light was conveniently shaded by muslin curtains, lined with pale blue silk, which had the effect of throwing a soft unobscuring pallor and general appearance of delicacy over the Baronne's countenance, on those not very rare occasions when it satled her to be in an invalid state.

She had sat silent for some time, smelling at her nails, and eating chocolate bon-bons. Presently she began. It was a long story. There had been a day, many years ago, when she and the Count had been alone together, and she had been talking to him

about those four beautiful pictures, and expressing her intense admiration for them, and how important a part they played in her general happiness, and how dreadful it would be ever to lose them. Then she went on, partly to remember, and partly to invent the Count's answer, of how she was never to be without the presence of those silent sources of so much bliss. No disposition he ever should or could make in his will was to deprive her of those valuable portraits. Therefore, of course, Camille would never dispute her father's real intentions, though they might seem to have changed at the time he wrote that wicked will, which, but for the fact that he was not fully conscious of what he was doing, could never have come from his hand. Camille listened in silence. Her cheeks burnt with shame and indignation. She was beginning to feel that the time had come when it would be necessary to put a stop to this. She had no wish that her mother should be deprived of anything that she desired to possess. But, on the other hand, her respect for her father's memory made it impossible for her, with her strict sense of justice, to sit calmly by and run the risk of the last wishes being to a great extent gradually and silently put aside and overruled, and then all future remembrance silenced by the assertion that she had given her consent—that if Madame vonderblanc did not inherit these valuables through her husband's testamentary dispositions, she at least held them as a gift from her daughter.

"[TO BE CONTINUED.]"

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