

Angelo Salmon took a long breath, and then dived into the one great subject of his life, and got over it for good.

"Miss Westbrook, Miss Mabel," he began, "it is useless to dispute the fact that—I have been a different being since I first had the pleasure of your acquaintance. I—I have felt a wiser and better man, if you will not think me conceited in saying so. I have seen before me something to live for—and strive for—and pray for—and that is your affection. Miss Westbrook, upon my word and honour, I love you very much indeed."

It was a simple confession, and soon related. There was no eloquence about it, and a great deal of embarrassment; but it was a genuine utterance, which affected the listener more than a page and a half of the best blank verse would have done under similar circumstances.

Mabel looked down, and changed colour at the young man's earnestness, and the tears for a while swam in her great grey eyes.

Angelo awaited her reply, and presently it came:—

"My poor Angelo," she said, in a strange, sad tone which he knew at once presaged his death-warrant, "I am very sorry you should have thought of me. I am not unmindful of the value of the compliment you pay me, or why at such a time you speak out all that is in your heart; but I wish you had not said a word."

"Why not?"

"Because you might have seen the truth for yourself, and spared both of us," she replied; "because your proposal suggests that I have given you encouragement."

"Now, pray don't think that for a moment," Angelo hastened to add. "I am presumptuous, I know—I should have waited a longer period—addressed you in a different manner—said and done a hundred different things in a hundred different ways—but I could only realize the facts that you had met misfortune, were going from Penton, and that in a single moment I might lose you. I was miserable—and I came to you."

"In declining this offer, Angelo," she said, "do I render you less miserable?"

"I—I don't know," was his reply.

"And I must decline it—thankfully, but very firmly—and trusting that such a question as this may never rise between us again."

"Very well—certainly—of course it shall not," said Angelo, with a great gulp down of something in his throat, "I am the last man to harass and distress you by my pertinacity."

"I believe that."

"Although I did not expect you would say 'yes' to my proposal," he continued, "or was vain enough to believe that I had made any impression upon you. Quite the contrary."

"Why then——"

"But as I told Mr. Halfday a short while ago, I only wanted a faint hope to build upon, a hope that in good time—a long day hence—I don't care how long—I mean I do care about that a little——" he said correcting himself, and blushing more vividly at his blunder, "that you would learn to regard me with less—less—dislike."

"I do not dislike you, Mr. Salmon," Mabel replied; "I know you are an honest and true friend. Keep so—I am short of friends just now—but never let me think again that you are dreaming of me as your future wife. I am totally unfit for you."

"Yes," said Angelo with a heavy sigh, "he said so."

"Who said so?"

"Brian Halfday."

"This evening?"

"Yes."

"You two appear to have been discussing all my merits and demerits," said Mabel.

"You said he was a man to place confidence in."

"Yes. But one man does not go to another to trouble him with such love nonsense as this."

"No—no," cried Angelo, "not nonsense—to love you!"

Mabel coloured again.

"A man like Brian Halfday would consider your confession nonsensical and trivial," said Mabel.

"Oh! no—he didn't," answered Angelo, "because he saw I was in earnest."

"And needed his advice?"

"Well—yes."

"And he gave you a sufficient amount of it to bring you here?"

"Yes," Angelo said again, and this time very mournfully.

"A sufficient amount of encouragement, I mean?"