

Whatever may happen, nothing shall ever change my feelings towards you."

"And you believe that I really love you, as you deserve to be loved."

"I do."

"Then, Helen, I declare that they shall not part us: even if they succeed for a time, they shall not break the tie that binds our hearts together. And more, I say, that I will have from Sir William's own lips his reason for wishing to put an end to our mutual love."

"Oh! Frank, be gentle. Remember all the kindness that I have experienced at his hands. For the last ten years, he has been to me in the place of a father."

"I do remember it, Helen; but even that memory must not prevent me from knowing his reason. His kindness in the past cannot for a moment justify his cruel conduct now. I will see to it. I will see Sir William myself. If then he can show good cause for denouncing to my suit; and if you, on hearing that cause, can really and truly acquiesce in the justice of his objections; then—and then only, will I withdraw, and pray fervently that you may find one more worthy of you—one who will love you with a truer and a deeper love. When I hear from your lips, Helen, that Sir William has convinced you, I will obey; but no other voice than your own shall induce me to resign you. Till then, nothing shall move me; nothing!"

And he strained her to his heart in the vehemence of his passionate love; and kissed her as the token of his unflinching devotion. She, looking tearfully up into his face, said—

"Frank, nothing shall change me. I do indeed love you, and I will be firm through every trial and every change."

"God bless you, my darling. But fear not, if we but remain true to each other, we shall bring things to a happy issue. Meanwhile I must see Sir William, or perhaps I had better write to him first. Then, if his letter does not satisfy me, I will see him in person, and learn something more definite."

"Promise me one thing, Frank; be gentle with him."

"I will be just, Helen, and justice must claim the precedence of all else."

And so the lovers parted, each eager for the solution of the mystery which seemed to overhang their courtship; a mystery, however which a few days was destined to clear up.

CHAPTER II.

Frank Evelyn was considerably perplexed, at what he considered, the extraordinary conduct of Sir William Mansfield in declining his proposal for the hand of Helen Conway, without vouchsafing any reason for his refusal. But after the excitement of his interview with Helen had passed away, he began to view the question in a calmer manner, and to flatter himself that a little conversation with the baronet would adjust the matter. He knew well enough, or at least, he fancied that he knew well enough, that monetary considerations could have no connection with his rebuff, for Sir William had been the banker of the Evelyns for many years. It might, indeed, be possible, that he was looking higher for Helen, and expected that the large fortunes which she would inherit would give her a claim to a coronet; but it was well-known that three such offers had been distinctly and deliberately refused. He was therefore compelled to lay aside this possible explanation, and determined to write at once, and obtain the elucidation of his difficulty.

Accordingly, Sir William found a letter from Evelyn lying on the breakfast table for him the next morning. He broke it open impatiently, and read

"Sir,—I have received to-day indirect information that you entertain a strong objection to my suit for the hand of your ward, Miss Conway. I shall be glad to receive from you either contradiction of the same, or some reason for your refusal, that shall enable me definitely to accept it.

"I am, sir, your obedient servant,
FRANK EVELYN.

"To Sir William Mansfield, Bart."

"Confound the fellow's pertinacity!" was the baronet's remark, when he had read the letter.

"But I will soon convince him that I know my own mind, and that I mean to adhere to the line of conduct which I have marked out." And he forthwith indited the following reply, which he immediately despatched:—

"Sir,—I beg to state that your information is perfectly correct; and to inform you that I have no intention either of altering my opinion, or of holding myself answerable to you for any step which I may take with reference to the future interests of my ward.

"I am, sir, your obedient servant,

WILLIAM MANSFIELD.

"To Frank Evelyn, Esq."

And having sent his reply to the post, he complacently flattered himself that he had done everything that was needful, and had completely settled Evelyn's claim; though occasionally a doubt crossed his mind as to whether he had not been too laconic and abrupt, and had treated his correspondent in somewhat too contemptuous a style. He speedily, however, dismissed any such thought, and early in the course of the morning took his departure from Mansfield Hall, to attend to his important business in Lombard Street.

Directly after his arrival at the Bank he summoned his confidential manager to his private room.

"How do matters stand, Baynes?" he asked, as soon as the door was closed.

"Very badly, Sir William."

"How? What do you mean by very badly? Have we enough actual cash to meet to-day's probable demands?"

"Yes; I think there is no doubt that we can go through to-day; and might possibly manage to-morrow, if no heavy cheque comes in."

"Good! I almost feared matters were worse. However, it is perfectly evident something must be done, and that promptly, too; for if the rumour once gets abroad in the City that we are short, it will be all over with us; we should be obliged to stop payment."

"We should, Sir William," echoed the manager.

"Now, Baynes, that is a contingency that we must carefully guard against."

The manager slowly inclined his head.

"It is a danger which must be averted," continued the banker.

"It must," the manager replied.

"At all risks and hazards," was the echo.

"You understand distinctly what I mean, Baynes? Nothing—nothing must stop us from taking the necessary measures to avert this blow. No compunction must stand in our way. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir William."

"And you are prepared to go through with it? Mind, you have my authority for doing it."

"I am prepared, Sir William."

"It has succeeded before."

"And it shall do so again," replied Baynes, suddenly seeming to wake up, and with a look of determination on his face.

"You are an invaluable servant, Baynes. Let us lose no time. How much do we want?"

"Fifty thousand pounds."

"And there are good securities for the amount?"

"For more than double."

"Then raise sixty thousand. You understand me? The bank requires fifty: raise sixty, and I shall be satisfied."

"The amount shall be in this house before to-morrow morning. Will you oblige me with the key of the strong room?"

"It is in my private drawer, Baynes. But, mind, let everything be done carefully and secretly. Be judicious in your selection."

"I will take care of that, Sir William. You will give me authority to raise sixty thousand pounds, and to pay away ten thousand privately for you? The balance will be availed for business purposes to-morrow morning?"

"Yes. Your plan will be perfectly satisfactory, Baynes. I suppose I can make myself quite easy on the subject now?"

"Perfectly easy, Sir William."

And the manager, with a low bow of meek obeisance, left the room. But a minute afterwards he returned, to say that a gentleman wished to speak with the banker. For a wonder, the manager had not looked at the card, which he handed over. Had he done so, matters might have ended differently; but perhaps he was too much engrossed.

Sir William muttered something that sounded very much like an oath, and then said, quickly:—

"Show him in, Baynes—show him in."

And accordingly Frank Evelyn was ushered into Sir William Mansfield's private room.

Evelyn looked towards the banker as if he expected to read in his face the unmistakable indications of enmity; but he was completely surprised when Sir William advanced towards him, with a smile upon his face, and, shaking him warmly by the hand, said:—

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Evelyn. You have doubtless received my note on the matter on which you communicated with me?"

"I have, Sir William," answered Evelyn, scarcely knowing what to think of the manner of his reception—whether to interpret it unfavourably or otherwise.

"Ah! then we may consider that affair as settled. Is there anything in the way of business in which my advice can be of service to you?"

"Sir William Mansfield, you must allow me to assure you at once that, far from considering the matter which you have mentioned as settled, I have sought this interview with you now for the express purpose of getting some more definite explanation from you, as to your motives in so decidedly putting your veto upon my engagement with Miss Conway. I know perfectly well that you are invested with certain powers of discretion in your capacity of guardian, and I do not deny your perfect right of exercising those powers, especially in an affair of so much importance as the present. But I, at the same time, think that, after the many years during which my family have been known to you, it would at least have been an act of courtesy on your part to mention to me the reason for giving me an answer in the negative. If the objection be in any way connected with money affairs, I could in some measure understand it, though I believe I could remove all apprehensions on that score. If—but I will start no more hypotheses; I will appeal to you frankly to give me some explanation of my rejection. I do not think you can refuse it."

"I admit the justice of a great deal that you say, Mr. Evelyn; but at the same time I can assure you that I thoroughly made up my mind; and it will be mere waste of time to endeavour to change my decision."

"That will in a great measure depend upon the nature of your objection."

"I beg your pardon; there you are mistaken. My decision will not be influenced by any modification of my original objection."

"Will that be just, Sir William?"

"Perfectly so."

"I really cannot understand it."

"Pray do not attempt to do so. Accept my answer; it will be quite sufficient."

"Nay! I fairly look for some reason."

"I fear that your expectations, however fair they may be, will nevertheless be doomed to remain unfulfilled."

"Am I to conclude, then, that you refuse to accede to my very moderate request?"

"That is the only conclusion to which my remarks can lead you. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I can say no more."

"Then, Sir William, learn that I am not only disappointed, but dissatisfied; and that I shall make my dissatisfaction felt in a way that you will not fail to appreciate. You have treated me most unhandsonably—most unfairly. I love Helen Conway, and she is willing to accept me for her husband. Show me the good cause or reason why this should not be. You cannot, or will not, be it so. I accept your answer now, but not in the spirit that you wish. Once more, I ask you either to grant my suit, or to show reason to the contrary."

"I cannot recall my words," the banker answered, rather slowly.