

'I can say, without any conscience-qualms, that until I met you I had no experience of what it is to love as doubtless every woman has loved once in her lifetime. And yet, since you have made perfect candour between us the order of the evening, I . . . I think I had best repose in you a confession.'

'By all means do so.'

Wallace Willard's voice! Is it possible that no thought of his objectionable situation occurred to Reginald at this moment. Astonishment was alone uppermost within him, as Beatrice now proceeded, rather hesitatingly :

'During several weeks before you came here, Reginald, as you have heard, was suffering from the effects of an accident. We were constantly thrown in each other's society. . . . Often I would spend hours at his side, talking with him, or reading aloud. His mother had often hinted to me, in a hundred ways more or less pointed, that if we two should ever care for each other, such an occurrence would prove the gratification of a very dear wish. Until then I had never believed that Reginald felt for me other than a most ordinary regard ; but repeatedly, during those days of his convalescence, I fancied that I discovered in him signs of an actual passion. And it was great pain for me to believe that I had inspired any such intenser feeling ; for . . . let me say it most solemnly. . . I had none to bestow in return. But my love for Mrs. Ross, my deep respect for her wishes . . . my strong sense of duty toward a friend who.'

'I know,' the other voice broke in, with soft and sympathizing tones ; 'I understand perfectly. You would have accepted Reginald at that time if he had asked you to marry him ? Or did he ask, and did you refuse ?'

Those were the last words of this conversation to which Reginald listened. Gliding away, he paced up and down the hall for a long time. There was no suspicion in his soul that Wallace Willard, by his recent advice,

had played false, having guessed the concealed truth. Unjust as such a suspicion would have been, many a man, under circumstances like the present, would have been prone to foster it. But no thought of the kind troubled Reginald. He simply felt an excited over-glowing sense of liberty. The inexorable finger of duty no longer pointed toward a certain path. If his mind reverted at all toward Willard it was only that he felt for his friend a genial instinctive gratitude. Willard had forever settled the tormenting problem. By falling in love with Beatrice and winning her love in return, this man had freed himself, Reginald, from all future excuses for doing otherwise than his emotional part had long so powerfully prompted. His course was clear now, and it seemed literally paved with self-justification. Toward Beatrice fate had lastingly sealed his lips ; and not the most rigid casuist, knowing every struggle through which he had fought his way, could have blamed him now for letting this residual need profit by which his spiritual demand had irrevocably lost. Perhaps ten minutes later Reginald heard the door of the sitting-room, which was situated considerably further toward the outer entrance of the hall, slowly unclose. He chanced, at this time, to be considerably distant from the opening door, having sunk into an easy chair midway between library and sitting-room. But now he saw Eloise come forth, and a single glance at her face showed him its unwontedly flushed condition.

Reginald's heart gave a quick bound. A sudden colour showed itself on his face, and his eyes took a rich, softening light. It occurred to him that Eloise had never looked prettier than now, as she came and stood before him, with her blonde hair waved in crisp disorder about her fresh young face, and wearing a great pink rose in the bosom of her white-muslin dress.

'Are you alone ?' he asked. 'I mean, has Austin left you ?'