

If she had not been asked to look toward her left, she would probably have done so; as it was, she resolutely avoided any movements in that direction.

The play finished in a tumult of applause. Lady Kate Talbot forgot everything in her excitement, and as she stood up, flushed and trembling, she inadvertently turned toward the left. Instantly she recognized a presence with which she ought to have been familiar enough.

The gentleman bowed with an extreme respect. Lady Kate acknowledged the courtesy in a manner too full of astonishment to be altogether gracious, and the elaborate politeness or the recognition was not softened by any glance implying a more tender intimacy than that of mere acquaintance.

My lady was silent all the way home, and for some reason Selina was not disposed to interrupt her reverie. It did not seem to be an unpleasant one. Kate's face had a bright flush on it, and her eyes held in them a light—a light that resembled what Selina would have called hope and love, if my lady had not been already married, and her destiny apparently settled.

"Selina, when you have got rid of all that lace and satin, come to my room; I have something to say to you."

Selina nodded pleasantly. She was sure it concerned the gentleman on the left. She had no love affairs of her own on hand or heart at present, and being neither literary nor charitable her time went heavily onward. A little bit of romance—nothing wrong, of course, but just a little bit of romance, especially if connected with the cold and proper Lady Talbot—would be of all things the most interesting.

She was speedily unrobed, and with her long black hair hanging loosely over her pretty dressing-gown she sought my lady's room. Lady Talbot sat in a dream-like stillness, looking into the bright blaze on the hearth. She scarcely stirred as Selina took a large chair beside her, and scarcely smiled when she lifted one of her loosened curls, and said, "What exquisite hair you have, Kate! True golden."

"Yes, it is beautiful. I know that, of course."

"Of what are you thinking so intently?"

"Of the gentleman on our left to-night."

"Ah! who is he? He seemed to know you."

"He ought to know me much better than he does. He is my husband, Lord Richard Talbot."

"Kate!"

"It is true."

"I thought he was in Africa, or Asia, or Europe, or somewhere at the end of the world."

"He is now in England, it seems. I suppose he has just arrived. I have not seen him before."

"Where is he staying, then?"

"I presume in the left wing of this mansion. I notice there are more lights than usual in it to-night. His apartments are there."

"Now, Kate, do tell me all, dear. You know I love a romantic love affair, and I am sure this is one."

"You were never more mistaken, Selina. There is no love at all in the affair. That is the secret of the whole position. I thought as you were staying here this week, and might probably see or meet my lord, it was better to make all clear to you. People are so apt to associate wrong with things they do not understand."

"To be sure, dear. I suppose Lord Richard and you have had a little disagreement. Now, if I could only do anything

toward a reconciliation, I should be so happy, you know."

"No, Selina, there has been no quarrel, and you can do nothing at all between us. I don't want you to try. Just be kind enough to ignore the whole circumstance. Lord Richard and I understood each other nearly four years ago."

"But it is not four years since you married?"

"Just four years—yesterday."

"And my lord has been away—"

"Three years, eight months and eighteen days, so far as I know."

"Well, this is a most extraordinary thing, and very, very sad, I must say."

"It might easily have been much sadder. I am going to tell you the exact truth, and I rely upon your honor and discretion to keep the secret inviolable."

"My dear Kate, I would not name it for the world."

"Listen, then. One night, when I was scarcely seventeen years old, my father sent for me to come to his study. I had known for months that he was dying. He was the only creature I had to love, and I loved him very tenderly. I must mention this also, for it partly explains my conduct that the idea of disobeying him in anything had never presented itself to me as a possibility. This night I found with him his lifelong friend, the late Lord Talbot, and the present lord, my husband; I was a shy, shrinking girl, without any knowledge of dress or society, and very timid and embarrassed in my manners. Then my father told me that it was necessary for the good of both houses that Richard and I should marry, that Richard had consented, and that I must meet a few friends in our private chapel at seven o'clock in the morning a week later. Of course these things were told me in a very gentle manner, and my dear father, with many loving kisses, begged me as a last favor to him to make no objection."

"And what did Lord Richard say?"

"I glanced up at him. He stood near a window, looking out over our fine old park, and when he felt my glance he colored deeply and bowed. Lord Talbot said, rather angrily, 'Richard, Miss Esher waits for you to speak.' Then Lord Richard turned toward me and said something, but in such a low voice that I did not catch its meaning. 'My son says you do him a great honor—and pleasure,' exclaimed Lord Talbot; and he kissed me, and led me toward the unwilling bridegroom."

"Of course I ought to have hated him, Selina, but I did not. On the contrary, I fell desperately in love with him. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had not Richard read my heart in my face, and despised his easy conquest. As for me, I suffered in that weakness and suspense of a timid school-girl in love. I dressed myself in the best of my plain, unbecoming childish toilets, and watched wearily every day for a visit from my promised husband; but I saw no more of him until our wedding morning. By this time some very rich clothing had arrived for me, and also a London maid, and I think, even then, my appearance was fair enough to have somewhat conciliated Richard Talbot. But he scarcely looked at me. The ceremony was scrupulously and coldly performed, my father, aunt and governess being present on my side; and on Richard's, his father and his three maiden sisters."

"I never saw my father alive again; he died the following week, and the mockery of our wedding festivities at Talbot Castle was suspended at once in deference to my grief. Then we came to London, and my lord selected for his own use the left wing of this house, and politely placed at my disposal all