

THE CASE OF SIR EDWARD TALBOT

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The case of Sir Edward Talbot by Valentine Goldie

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CHAPTER I

SEATED apart and unnoticed in the embrasure of a window, the girl surveyed with a serene expression of contentment the shouting assembly that crowded the long drawing-room from end to end. At the new arrival within the range of her vision of any woman, her grave eyes studied dispassionately and quickly every detail of her dress, subsequently returning to the contemplation of a man who formed the centre of a group almost immediately in front of her.

Admiration of his physical qualities could hardly have been the cause of this recurrent attention, for he was a smallish, quiet-looking person, by no means in his first youth. Possibly a sense of sympathy drew her to him; for, except for herself, he was the only guest in sight who had entirely preserved mental and physical coolness. His associates directed most of their remarks to him, with vehement cries and gestures; and he replied softly, seriously and with unvarying deliberation. The smooth, hairless face was one of the calmest imaginable; the lips gently smiling, the pale, luminous eyes alive with a polite receptiveness, the whole expression admirably

balanced and tolerant. From the demeanour of his satellites one would have guessed him to be something of a notoriety, and the conjecture would have been supported by the fact that he had a rather remarkable skull. Its size was not the result of any local exaggeration; it was big and solid in every part, with a slightly convex forehead; a head which must have inspired the highest admiration and respect for its owner in any phrenologist. The pale chestnut hair was cut as short as was consistent with admitting a parting, and brushed smoothly. The ears were oddly, even rather unpleasantly small, with a perfectly straight upper edge. Had not the malformation occurred in both, it might have been taken to be due to an accident instead of to a congenital defect. The jaw was firm, but not prominent, the skin fair and the mouth well cut. There was nothing beautiful nor even remarkable in the face, beyond its tranquillity. His general aspect was that of a man somewhere between forty and forty-five years of age.

It is scarcely possible to look at a person in one's immediate neighbourhood for many seconds without attracting his notice, and very shortly the glances of the girl and the object of her scrutiny met. Immediately she allowed her eyes to travel slowly and composedly past him; but his remained fixed, and when, after a while, she casually looked back in his direction he was still watching her.

There was nothing impudent or challenging in his stare, which spoke only of an awakened interest; nevertheless it was sufficiently pronounced to cause one or two of his friends to follow its direction. The girl slightly turned her head away and began to interest herself in some newly arrived visitors; and while she was so engaged the man left his companions and sauntered down the room, to return a few minutes later in the wake of a portly, grey-haired lady, picturesquely dressed in a loose robe of lace.

"Little Shirley!" cried the elderly woman in a full rich voice which accorded with her dignified corpulence. "Sitting all alone and neglected! How very pathetic! I'd no idea you'd come, even. Couldn't you find me?"

"I did speak to you when I arrived; and really I've been quite happy sitting here watching the people."

"My dear, I haven't the faintest recollection of seeing you before, this evening. But there's such a crowd, isn't there? One's head quite spins. Do let me introduce Sir Edward Talbot to you; such an interesting man—but of course you've heard all about him. He's most anxious to know you. Sir Edward, come here! I want to introduce you to my friend, Miss Cresswell; and perhaps presently you'll take her and give her an ice or something. . . . How sweet of you to come, dear Clara! I was so afraid

that you might be too tired, after the theatre. Isidore has been asking anxiously after you. Will you come with me and find him?"

She moved off majestically, and Sir Edward Talbot, after bowing with affable dignity, took a seat beside Shirley on the little sofa.

"I hope you'll forgive me for forcing my company on you," he began in a pleasant, if rather expressionless, voice. "But you looked so cool and restful, and I soon get weary of strenuous warmth."

"There's been nothing to break my rest yet," she explained, smiling. "I haven't seen anyone here I know, so far, except Mrs. Cassilis."

"And she hasn't been looking after you properly? However, you appeared remarkably contented. I hesitated about disturbing you."

His manner clearly shewed that the approach of middle age had not robbed him of the pleasure to be derived from the society of an attractive woman.

"Oh, no! I'm glad to talk, though up to now I've been enjoying the clothes. That's my business in life, you see. I design dresses."

"Mrs. Cassilis was telling me. For Delbruck of South Molton Street, isn't it? I offer you my compliments. Several of the friends of whose company I feel proudest get their things there. Shew me some of your achievements here to-night."

"There's Mrs. Cassilis herself."