

# Dr Aram

By

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# Kalfian

## Rowlands

### SYNOPSIS OF OPENING CHAPTERS.

DICK EMBERSON, aged twenty-five, of Ardwell Court, Sussex county, England, has become engaged to Enid Anerley. He is summoned to London by a letter from Denise Alston, a widow, whom he had loved and who still loves him. He tells her of his engagement. She says that she will not give him up, and she shows him a letter which greatly worries him. Soon after his return, his home burns down, and his father's body—the head missing—is found in the ruins.

As a natural consequence of the overnight agitation the household was somewhat late astir the next morning. There was no one about when Dick Emberson, a little before six, emerged from his room and crept noiselessly down the broad oak staircase. His anxiety to avoid waking the ladies would account no doubt for a certain stealthiness in his step, and for the uneasy looks he cast back over his shoulder, and yet his movements, his manner, suggested almost a sense of guilt. He drew back the heavy bolts of the front door, unlocked and opened it, and made his way swiftly, like a man with a purpose, towards what was left of his father's house. He had not seen it since Enid had taken him by the hand and led him, weak and unresisting, from the scene of the catastrophe, and he stood now for a few minutes gravely examining the extent of the devastation: the framework of the building was still almost intact, although the whole of the interior of the first and second floors had collapsed into the rooms below. The front of the house had suffered most; the fire had evidently commenced in Mr. Emberson's bedroom, the side walls being only scorched and discoloured. The old Hall appeared from the front to be holding up appealing arms to heaven in protest against the calamity which had befallen it; and the blackened and empty window-openings of the upper rooms looked like eyes that had wept themselves blind.

It would have been a pitiful sight enough to an utter stranger; how much more so must it have been then to one who had called it home and been proud of the associations clinging to it; yet Dick Emberson gazed at the ruins apparently unmoved. True, his face was white and lined with the mental suffering he had passed through—he had aged by years in those two days; but there was no softness of regret in his eyes—no mist of tears impeded his clearness of vision—they were hard and dry, and almost fiercely alert—like a man on guard against some threatened danger.

Walking around and clambering over the mounds of ashes and charred wood, he peered into what had been the library. Being at the side of the house, and giving on to the garden, it had been one of the last to be reached by the flames. On the night of the catastrophe, Dick had been like a man in a dream, scarcely conscious of what was going on around him; but now it came back to his memory that the servants had tried to save some of the contents of this room. Under Colonel Anerley's directions, eager hands had torn some of the more valuable pictures from the walls, and brought out some of the smaller pieces of furniture; finally, they had half dragged, half-lifted out into the open the square iron safe in which the master of the house had kept papers and personal valuables. Whilst doing this, the men had been nearly caught in a death-trap, for, as they staggered out with their heavy load, the ceiling of the room had fallen with a crash behind them.

All this came back clearly to Dick's mind as he stared in upon what was only a heap of wreckage; but where had the men placed their salvage? One of his chief objects in coming there that morning had been to ascertain if any of his father's private papers had escaped the flames; and, if so, to guard against the danger of their falling into any other hands but his own. He blamed himself now for having allowed a day to pass without seeing to this. His eyes soon convinced him that there was but one possible place of storage left standing—some out-houses in the background; and, striding quickly in that direction, he found, as he had expected, the interior of the sheds piled high with a heterogeneous

mass of household belongings. An indifferent person would probably have smiled at sight of some of the objects which had been carefully saved, whilst others, really valuable, had been left to the flames; but, intent upon his purpose, the young man was as blind to the ludicrous as to the pathetic. It was a good half-hour before, peering, pushing, lifting, he caught sight of one of the objects of his search. Yes, there was that bulky iron safe in which he had often seen his father place deeds and papers; it held its secrets grimly intact, they were safe enough for the present even from his hands; still, it would be wiser for him to beg the Colonel to allow it to be brought up to his house with as little delay as possible, lest by chance someone ferreting amongst the ruins should find the key. If the latter never came to light the safe would have to be broken open in his, Dick's, presence.

Thus reflecting, he made his way again round to the front. Once more he gazed along and intently at the blackened walls to which the giant ivy stems still clung tenaciously. It had covered with its waving green mantle two sides of the house, and had been the pride of several generations. Now its glory was shorn from it; but its gnarled and knotted branches, though scorched and blackened, still clasped the old walls tightly in their embrace, as if determined that even death should not sever them.

It will be remembered that it was by clambering down the ivy that Dick had succeeded in escaping from the burning building. He seemed now to be measuring with his eyes the distance between one of the main stems, thick as a man's wrist, and the opening which had been his father's window; it passed close enough to enable any active man to haul himself through the gap. Whatever the doubt was in his mind, for a moment it seemed as if he would be mad enough to try and set it at rest by attempting the ascent; then, with a stifled groan, he turned his head and looked about searchingly in all directions. He found what he wanted in the shape of a long iron pole, with a hook at the end, which the men had used to dislodge some tottering and unsafe portions of the building. Thrusting his implement between the ivy and the wall, he wrenched and pulled with a savage fury till he succeeded in bringing to the ground the long branches which had been trained over the front. They fell sideways with a thud, and as they did so something small and glittering escaped from them and fell a yard or so more forward. Whatever it was, it buried itself in falling; but Dick's quick eyes had marked the spot, and in a few minutes, raking with his hands amongst the debris, he had succeeded in bringing it to light. It was a sleeve link of some yellow metal. At first, dirty and stained as it was, it looked an object of little enough value; but when he had rubbed and cleansed it with his handkerchief, he discovered that the two sides of the link were oblong shields of beaten gold with a raised initial in the centre of each. The letters were "A. K."

### CHAPTER V.

#### INTRODUCES TED ALSTON.

THE eight o'clock breakfast was just over at "The Lindens" when Dick, entering, took his place at the table with a murmured apology. The Anerleys were early people, and the Colonel had accustomed his household to a military punctuality. He greeted his young friend cheerily; then, leaving the other members of the family to look after him, took up his newspaper and passed out on to the verandah.

"The women, bless them, will fuss over the lad quite enough without my help; best leave him to them," he said to himself.

Needless to say, his expectations were amply fulfilled. Enid hovered about the late comer with a tender solicitude, hanging as carefully upon his words as if the fate of the nation depended upon his choice of grilled bacon or haddock; and that, in the event of his choosing wrongly, the Empire

would swiftly take that downward course with which it has so long been threatened.

Mrs. Anerley poured out his tea, and as she handed it to him, asked—

"What made you go out so early? I hoped you were resting, and sent the maid up with your breakfast; but she came down and reported that your room was empty."

"I got so weary of tossing about that I dressed and went out," he said, "to—to look at the old place."

"It was very wrong of you to go there by yourself, Dick," murmured Enid, reproachfully. "You might know how it would upset you. I shall ask Dr. Arnold to give you a sleeping draught to-night; we ought to have thought of it yesterday. Now, eat this, dear; do, to please me!"

Thus abjured, Dick did his best, though all food seemed to stick in his throat and threaten to choke him. It was curious, but he made no mention of the object he had found that morning, and which was at present lying safely concealed in his waistcoat pocket, although he might have known the matter would have been of interest to the two ladies; neither did he mention it to the Colonel when, a few minutes later, having finished his meal, or rather having succeeded in escaping from the tender ministrations with which he was beset, he joined the latter. He asked him instead about the possibility of his father's writing-table and safe being brought up to the house.

"Certainly, my boy," was the somewhat surprised rejoinder. "I will give orders about it at once. I expect some of the keys they have found belong to them."

"Keys! What keys? I did not know any had been found," replied the other, sharply.

"Nor I, till this morning. My man told me. I expect Pollard was his authority. I think the latter was rather confused at your reception of his report last night, and so forgot to mention it to us. It seems the blade of a pocket-knife, a bunch of keys on a ring, and one single one were found close to your poor father's body."

"Why were they not brought up here?" asked Dick, angrily; "they should have been given into my hands at once!"

COLONEL ANERLEY glanced up over his gold spectacles in mild surprise at this fresh proof of his young friend's irritability about trifles.

"No doubt they will send them up if you wish it," he said, soothingly.

"I do wish it," was the quick reply. "I don't choose my father's private papers to be at the mercy of strangers."

"There is no fear of that, my dear boy; the keys are safe enough at the police station. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose they will be of much use to you or anyone else; bent and warped as they must be—they are far more likely to hamper locks than open them."

"That had not occurred to me," replied Dick, thoughtfully; "the safe then will have to be broken open."

The Colonel's brows knit together with a sudden frown, as if the remark which had fallen, half-meditatively, half-questioningly, from his companion's lips, was eminently distasteful to him. In truth, it both jarred upon his finer feelings and puzzled him. There are some heirs in whom a keen anxiety about the extent of their heritage would seem natural, if a little revolting; but Dick was not one of these: he had hitherto shown himself free from all mercenary calculations; it was singularly unlike him to be curious about the valuables his dead father had left behind. But, although this was the tenor of the older man's reflections, he showed no trace of them in his reply, which was simple and to the point—

"I suppose so; without you send to the makers, Prestiss & Usher, for another key. It is practically a new safe, for my poor old friend showed it to me on its arrival six months ago, so there will be no difficulty."

"Thanks for the suggestion; I will do so at once."

Glad to escape from the restraint of a longer conversation with a person with whom he was momentarily out of sympathy, Colonel Anerley departed upon his self-appointed task; and Enid, stepping out on to the verandah, came and stood by Dick's side.

Pre-occupied with his thoughts, he did not speak to her; she cast one quick glance into his face, and then yielding to that feminine need of always touching or resting in some fashion against the one beloved, she placed her hand lightly upon his shoulder. Turning his head, he pressed his lips to it. A flush of pleasure passed over her sensitive face at the mute caress. He paid no further attention.

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