

Dr Aram Kalfian

By Effie Adelaide Rowlands



CHAPTER XXI.

All-Conquering Love.

WHEN Ted returned home in the afternoon, he found that the invalid had been allowed by the doctor for the first time to leave his bed; and arrayed in a long, flowered dressing-gown, lay stretched upon the sofa in Mrs. Alston's little boudoir, which adjoined the bedroom she had insisted upon vacating for his use. It was a strangely altered Dick who smiled feebly up at his friend when the latter expressed his pleasure at seeing him so far on the road to convalescence. The strong, bristly growth of beard and moustache, which had not been removed during his illness, was in itself a great transformation, its darkness accentuating the pallor of his face; but the latter was, in addition, so thin that the framework of bones was clearly visible through the skin. Almost like a death's head, Ted thought with a shudder, and the hands which lay so listlessly upon the hand-embroidered coverlet Denise had thrown lightly over him, were waxen in their transparency, whilst his eyes, dull and sunken in their orbits, seemed like dark caverns.

A passionate anger rose up in his friend's heart as he gazed down at this pitiful wreck of young manhood; anger against those responsible for his condition, against his own mother first, and foremost, although even now he was far from guessing the real extent of her culpability.

Neither she nor Dick made any inquiry as to his movements during the day. Mrs. Alston knew by instinct where he had been; and was torn between the two conflicting emotions of burning anxiety as to what he might have heard, and bitter resentment at his having disregarded her expressed wishes; and by some mysterious telepathy it is probable that the sick man knew also, for every now and then he cast a wistful, inquiring look across at Ted, who had subsided into a chair and, drawing out a newspaper, began to read such scraps aloud as he deemed might be most interesting.

This proceeding soon got upon Mrs. Alston's strained and irritable nerves, and with some acerbity she begged him to desist.

"Can't you see you are tiring Dick to death?" she said.

Her son continued the perusal of his paper in silence—made a show of so doing at least, for behind the sheet he was keenly observant both of the sick man and his nurse. Little by little he was advancing nearer and nearer to the truth. He had left Bingleford convinced that his mother was in some way responsible for the separation of the lovers; but her motive and her means of effecting her purpose were alike mysterious to him. On his journey home, his thoughts reverted to the day when Enid had consulted him about the anonymous letter, which he rightly judged to be the beginning of the mischief; and which he felt sure had been the real cause of her visit to Grosvenor Square. Suddenly his own careless words recurred to him. "Why the unknown prints by hand almost as well as my mother!" and with a gasp of dismay he first faced the idea that Mrs. Alston herself, perhaps, had been the anonymous slanderer. He told himself that the suspicion was monstrous, incredible; but try as he might he could not shake it off.

He had never in the past years considered his mother's affection for his friend in anyway exaggerated or unnatural. "Dick's like a second son to her," he had often said—but now the scales had fallen from his eyes, and as she bent over the invalid, anticipating

his every wish, he read now in each tender glance, each caressing word, the evidence of a love other than the maternal.

The discovery filled Ted not only with shame and humiliation, but also with amazement.

How could this be? he asked himself. How could his mother—the mother he had always revered as much as loved—have conceived this monstrous passion for a man so many years her junior? For monstrous it seemed to him! Surely it was a sudden madness that had seized upon her! How else could he account for the fact that she had wilfully wrecked the happiness of a young girl who had never injured her; and that she had not hesitated to lie and scheme to effect her purpose.

Now that he knew all he could bear no longer to be a passive witness of her infatuation. Springing to his feet he approached the couch, and said somewhat abruptly:

"Let me sit for a while by Dick, whilst you play us something, mother."

She would have refused, but that the invalid, hearing the request, languidly opened his eyes and seconded it.

"Do please," he murmured.

Mrs. Alston reluctantly complied; she was an accomplished musician, and letting her slim fingers stray over the keys, she passed from one soft, caressing melody to another, till by a strange chance she glided into the "Liebes-tod," the last thing Dick had heard Enid play.

"Not that!" he cried sharply, "anything but that!"

The player's lips tightened angrily, as, without reply, by a cleverly modulated series of chords, she drifted into one of Mendelssohn's "Song without Words." She guessed only too well that the melody objected to had revived past scenes to the sick man's mental vision, had revived bitter-sweet memories; and the knowledge stung her almost beyond endurance.

Carefully lowering his voice so that his mother should not hear, Ted whispered:

"I have been down to The Lindens to-day, old man."

Dick nodded feebly.

"I thought so," he replied.

"Yes, by special request, too!" continued his friend. "Did your ears tingle, Dick? They should have, for our discourse was ever and only of you. I had sent them daily bulletins of your progress, but nothing but a verbal report would suit them. By Jove, my dear fellow, you would be flattered if you could realize what a commotion your illness has made in that household! Mrs. Anerley absolutely hugged me when I told her that you were getting on like a house on fire; and the Colonel is quite mad with himself that he did not prevent you, by force if necessary—I quote his own words—from leaving the shelter of his roof. I was charged with so many messages that it would take me a month of Sundays to deliver them—so I sha'n't attempt it!"

"Was there one amongst them—from Enid?"

The wistful look in Dick's eyes, the little quiver in his voice, hurt the other horribly.

"No actual message," he answered reluctantly, and the sick man made a feeble effort to turn on the couch so as to hide his face from his friend.

This was more than Ted could endure. Bending over him as if to place the cushions more comfortably, he continued:

"I don't quite know if what I am going to say would be considered a breach of confidence—if it is, I hope I may be forgiven for it later—but take this for comfort, dear old chap. Miss Anerley

told me in so many words, that she loved you with every fibre of her being. That ought to be good enough to go on with, I think. All you have got to do is to hurry up and get well and strong, and the other difficulties will, I promise you, fade away at your resolute approach. I am not much of a betting man, Dick; but I would willingly wager a handsome sum that by the time you are ready for your first walk, Enid's will be the arm to support you."

A sharp discordant note on the piano made the two men start and look round. Mrs. Alston rose from the instrument and came across. Placing her hand softly on the invalid's forehead she murmured caressingly:

"You are talking too much, dearest; your head is quite hot, and your face is flushed. Ted," with an angry glance at her son, "should know better than to allow you to excite yourself in that fashion. You will get no sleep to-night."

"What I have said will not prevent his sleeping, mother. Will it, old chap?"

Dick smiled up at his friend, and for the first time since his illness a light—the light of hope—shone in his dark eyes.

"On the contrary," he murmured low, "it will give me pleasant dreams. I have had nothing but nightmares lately."

"You are feverish again," persisted Mrs. Alston; "you have been up too long; you must go to bed at once."

"You are far too good to me," murmured Dick, gratefully; "but indeed, I feel better, much better. Don't you trouble! Ted will give me his arm into the next room."

"Yes, leave him to me, mother; I will see to him," responded that young gentleman.

Mrs. Alston bit her lip angrily.

"You will do nothing of the sort. Have you not done damage enough already? You are not fit to be trusted with an invalid!"

"I give you my solemn promise that I will not excite your patient in any way. I will neither talk to him nor allow him to speak," said Ted, looking straight into his mother's eyes, and speaking with a quiet decision, "so you may quite safely leave him to me. You have done more than your share hitherto of nursing; and now Dick is so much better, I intend to relieve you of it entirely."

To Mrs. Alston's unspeakable astonishment, her son took her gently but firmly by the arm and escorted her to the door, which he politely opened.

She turned on him with a face livid with anger.

"What is the meaning of this farce?" she asked in a harsh undertone.

"That you shall hear presently. Go downstairs, when I have tucked Dick up for the night. I will come and speak to you. He will be all the better now for being left to himself for a while," Ted answered gravely.

His look, his manner, told her that the moment she had long foreseen and dreaded had arrived; and subdued by a fear that was new and strange to her, she meekly obeyed.

About half-an-hour later Ted entered the drawing-room, where he found his mother pacing fiercely to and fro like a lioness robbed of her cubs.

"Will you kindly tell me now what this means?" she commenced, in a tone of biting sarcasm. "What excuse you can offer for your outrageous behaviour, in turning me by force out of my own room, and ordering me downstairs as if I were a child?"

"Is it worth while disputing over such trifles," he asked, like one bodily and mentally weary, "when there are

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