

Dr Aram Kalfian

By
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CHAPTER XVIII.

Dick's Story.

IN moments of great emotion, in presence of the giant issues of Life and Death, small pettinesses slip from us like a cloak. The sight of his father's face swept from Dick's mind all anger against the detective, and at the same time robbed him of the stoical calm in which he had striven to enwrap himself. Too long had he put an iron restraint upon his feelings, now Nature took her revenge. Falling upon his knees by the side of the poor mutilated morsel of humanity, he covered his face with his hands and sobbed like a child. An unwonted moisture dimmed Mr. Screed's eyes, as, with delicate instinct, he fell back so as not to disturb by his presence the sanctity of the son's grief; whilst Ted Alston, making no attempt to conceal the tears which streamed down his face, bent over his friend, throwing his arm in boyish fashion across the latter's shoulders, trying by his touch to convey the sympathy it was impossible to frame into words.

For some time they remained silent thus; then Dick, rising slowly to his feet, turned to Screed, saying in a voice from which all youth, all energy, seemed to have fled—

"Do what you have to do. I am beaten; my last stand is made."

"My mission here is ended, Mr. Emberson," replied the detective; "there is no need for further interference on my part; and you have my solemn assurance that the secret of to-night's work will never be divulged by me. Mr. Alston," turning to that young gentleman, "if I might suggest, it would be as well to finish as soon as possible the task interrupted by my arrival."

"By Jove!" cried the latter. "Mr. Screed, you are a brick!"

Dick's lips quivered; he made a gesture with both hands, as if to show that speech at that moment was impossible to him, and turned aside.

TED did his work rapidly and well, whilst the others stood by with bent and uncovered heads. It was over! With careful hands, young Alston sprinkled a few clumps of dry earth and broken twigs of brushwood over the spot so that no one could guess it had been disturbed. Then together and in amity, the three went down the hill together. Arrived at the "Green Man," Mr. Screed took his leave of them, saying—

"I shall have to have a few more words with you, Mr. Emberson, before I leave Bingleford for good; but there will be nothing in them that need distress you—of that you may rest assured."

To which Dick replied, in a voice that had in it a strange new note of shamed humility—

"Mr. Screed, I have misjudged you; and I am sorry for it! I have no words to-night to thank you; but, none the less do I feel, that I owe you a big debt of gratitude for your forbearance. I shall never forget it!"

"That's all right, Mr. Emberson," replied the detective hurriedly. "There's no need for thanks; but there is just one little favour I would ask of you."

"What is it?"

"Only that in return for what you call my forbearance, you will refrain from telling Miss Anerley that it was through her maid's instrumentality I managed to get a sight of the hidden packet. I don't want the girl to lose her place through me."

"It shall be as you wish," replied Dick somewhat absently; at the mention of Enid's name a twitch of pain had passed over his face, and he stood

for a second as if in deep thought. "Come up to Colonel Anerley's to-morrow at eleven, Mr. Screed," he said finally; "I have done with secrets; I see now that others besides myself have a right to know the exact truth about all that has happened here; and I have made up my mind to make a clean breast of the whole affair to the few I can call friends. I should like you, as one of them, to be present. It is scarcely a tale that one would wish to tell twice."

Young Emberson and his friend arrived at The Lindens at about a quarter to eleven, and a something in their reception struck the latter at once as abnormal, although Dick, his mind full of the painful task he had before him, failed to notice it. The whole atmosphere of the house seemed, in some indescribable fashion, to have changed. It was not so much a lack of cordiality as an embarrassment, a constraint which was evident in the manner of both the Colonel and his wife, and was even more marked in that of their daughter.

TED ALSTON was quickly concerned for the latter, who looked, he thought, shockingly ill. As for a second her hand rested in his and their glances met, there was a pathetic appeal in her blue eyes which moved him indescribably, although he could not guess what prompted it. "Help me!" it seemed to say. "Stand by me! Make things easier for me!" He noticed also, and wondered much thereat, that she seemed to shrink from her lover, managing to elude all warmer greeting than a pressure of the hand. There was no opportunity of questioning her, however, before the arrival of the detective. When Dick explained, in a few brief words, his purpose in asking the latter to meet him there, Colonel Anerley, after a quick glance at his daughter, cleared his throat, nervously and said—

"I think you are quite wise to come to an understanding with Mr. Screed; but there is no earthly reason, my dear boy, why we should be present at your interview with him! I must confess that, in the past, I have thought you somewhat unduly reticent; but as far as we are concerned, explanations are no longer needed. I—Enid."

"Father is right," interposed the young girl with trembling lips, "our presence would only cause you added pain, and is quite unnecessary."

"You must allow me to be the best judge of that!" replied Dick firmly, turning on her a surprised and somewhat reproachful glance. "I do not understand you, Enid! You hear your father say he has thought me unduly reticent. Not long ago, you yourself reproached me for not taking you sufficiently into my confidence. Well, I have come to the conclusion that I was listening rather to my pride than to my sense of duty in concealing certain facts from you all; and it is my wish now to make amends—to have done with concealment and mysteries, and, by God's help, and yours, dear, to make a fresh start. Colonel," he continued, facing that gentleman with a suddenness which made the latter jump in his chair, "when I ask you, in the name of the friendship you once felt for my unfortunate father, to comply with my wishes, surely you will not refuse me?"

At this juncture the servant announced that Mr. Screed was in the library; the master of the house arose with a resigned air—

"As you make such a point of it, Dick," he said, "I am at your service; but let us at least spare the ladies from the re-opening of a painful subject. I can inform them later of anything necessary for them to know."

Mrs. Anerley interposed before Dick had time to reply; she also had risen, and now resting one hand lightly on her husband's shoulder, remarked—

"It seems to me, John, that the casting vote in this matter is with Dick—if he wishes for our presence, Enid has not the right to deny him; and personally I should not dream of so doing. Do you wish it, Dick?"

"I do, Mrs. Anerley," he answered quickly and decisively.

"Then that settles the matter," she replied, and slipping one hand through her daughter's reluctant arm, she drew her with her along to the library.

When they were all seated, Dick, placing himself so that he faced them all, said—

"My story starts from the day before the fire which reduced Ardwell Court to ruins, the fire in which my father was supposed to have perished."

At the word "supposed" a vivid amazement was depicted on the faces of all present, with the exception of Mr. Screed, who gave a little quiet nod of comprehension and satisfaction; the Colonel's lips half-opened as if to frame a question, but closed again, leaving the words unspoken, as his wife whispered in his ear—"Don't interrupt, John! Let us hear all the boy has to say first."

"On the morning in question," continued Dick, "I received an imperative summons to London. I was warned that if I neglected it I should jeopardize the life of one near and dear to me. I did not believe in the bona fides of the summons. I thought it was a trick; but still I went. I was shown a letter from one who called himself a friend (aye, and who proved himself one, too, on this and on a subsequent occasion), although I had met him but once before in my life; the letter explained that the person referred to—the person who stood in deadly peril—was my father."

"It seemed that he had for years been connected financially with a secret Armenian Society. Perfectly indifferent as he was to their political aims, he had been entrusted by them, as an honest and a substantial man, with their funds, or 'war-chest,' as they call it: the one aim and ambition of the society—a huge and widely-known one—being to prepare themselves for the great day when they and their co-religionists would rise in their thousands and shake off the Turkish yoke, and by so doing secure the safety of their homes, their wives, their children—a safety which for centuries had hung upon the gossamer thread of a bloodthirsty tyrant's caprice."

"I scarcely know how to frame it into words. I probably shall never learn all the circumstances of the case—never know the exact nature of the sudden and overwhelming temptation which presented itself to my unhappy father. Suffice it to say, that he succumbed—he was faithless to his trust. Throughout Europe and Asia the society is bound together by a net-work of spies. In some fashion his guilt was suspected, was proved; and his death sentence was signed; that that sentence involved a further and ghastlier one I only learnt later. My informant who gave the warning at a great personal risk to himself, advised me to get my father away at once before the bloodhounds were on his track—and to ship him off disguised to America or Australia."

"At first I absolutely refused to believe the accusation brought against one whom I had always held to be a man of strict integrity. I maintained that it was all some hideous mistake which he, with my help, would be able to clear up; but when I spoke to him that evening on my return, when in plain, un-

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