

# Dr Aram Kalfian

By Effie Adelaide Rowlands



## CHAPTER XIII.

### Enid and Denise.

THE London season was drawing to a close; the jaded votaries of fashion were either preparing for flight to the different continental health resorts, or planning out lengthy and elaborate motor tours. "Where are you going?" and "When are you off?" were the questions of the hour, superseding the newest and spiciest scandal in the Divorce Court, and the latest thrill caused by the insufficient draperies of a dancer.

When the two important questions were put to Mrs. Alston by the few intimate friends who sought her out in the self-enforced seclusion of the house in Grosvenor Square, which seemed so absurdly big for the one lonely woman who occupied it, she met them with an indifferent, "I don't know. I have made no plans as yet."

"Ah, you are waiting for your son to decide for you," was the usual comment upon this announcement, which Denise allowed to pass uncontradicted.

What was she waiting for? She did not know herself; the mainspring of action seemed to have snapped within her; day by day she sank deeper into a brooding misery, dwelling on one idea until her very reason tottered. She had followed up the newspaper accounts of the catastrophe at Ardwell Court with a feverish interest. The event itself had been a great blow to her, for with Mr. Emberson's death her last hold over Dick had vanished. The grim tragedy of accomplished facts had rendered her threats vain and impotent. The worst had happened! he had nothing more to fear.

Ted had written to her from Bingleford; his letter had been one long paean on the beauty and charm of his friend's fiancée. It was easy enough for Mrs. Alston to read between the lines that her boy, too, had succumbed to the sway of the siren who had stolen Dick's heart from her. The knowledge at first filled her with a fierce, impatient anger; but, on second thoughts, she saw in Ted's folly, as she mentally termed it, a possible ally. If a doubt of her lover's truth and loyalty could be instilled in Enid Anerley's mind, might she not very possibly turn for sympathy and comfort to the man she had learnt to call friend? Many a heart is caught in the rebound.

The anonymous letter despatched by Denise had been the outcome of this reflection. She never doubted that Ted would be ready to avail himself of any and every opportunity to serve his own ends. We are all apt to judge others by ourselves, and she knew that in a similar position she would have been utterly unscrupulous. But, although she awaited each post impatiently, she heard no more from him.

ONE afternoon as she sat in her little boudoir, her hands idly folded in her lap, her mind revolving ever in one vexed circle, a lady's visiting card was brought in to her. The name it bore was "Miss Enid Anerley"; and above was written in pencil, "Shall be very grateful if you will grant me a few minutes' interview."

At sight of the printed name and written message, Mrs. Alston sprang to her feet, the blood rushing tumultuously to her face and neck. Her first impulse was to deny herself to the intruder, who, a guilty conscience suggested, had perhaps come to twit her with the authorship of the anonymous letter; then, a burning curiosity to see the woman who had supplanted her in Dick's affections, overpowered every other feeling, and she gave the order for her admittance.

Calling all her strength of dissimula-

tion to her aid, Denise advanced to meet her visitor with a very fair semblance of the old gracious courtesy of manner which for years had made her the acknowledged queen of her social circle.

Enid's cheeks were flushed, and she smiled a little nervously as she extended her hand, saying:

"It is kind of you to receive me, Mrs. Alston. Since I have known your son, I have been longing to make your acquaintance, but, without his encouragement, I should scarcely have dared to take the initiative."

"I am greatly indebted to you and your parents, Miss Anerley, for the kind hospitality you have extended to my son!" returned the elder lady, forcing her pale lips into an answering smile as, for the space of one half-second, she held the proffered hand limply in hers whilst she eagerly scanned its owner's face. A pang shot through her heart as her grudging eyes reluctantly recognized the latter's beauty. Half mechanically her glance travelled on to an old Florentine mirror hanging on the wall in which her own dark head served as a background and a foil for her visitor's fair loveliness. It was but a fleeting glance, yet it sufficed to fill Denise with renewed bitterness. The proximity of youth is cruel to the middle-aged; accentuating as it does slight defects which might otherwise pass unobserved; the freshness—the flawless purity of the young girl's skin and colouring made the other by comparison seem swarthy and faded. Under pretence of drawing forward a comfortable chair, she turned aside until she had brought her rebellious features under command.

"You would not talk of our kindness, Mrs. Alston," rejoined Enid, "if you knew what a comfort, what a veritable ray of sunshine your son has been to us all in the sad time through which we have been passing."

"I am glad he was able to be of use!" mechanically murmured Denise; "he is very much attached to Dick Emberson, and would, I know, take the latter's troubles almost as much to heart as if they were his own. I, too, have been unutterably shocked and grieved at the sorrow which has fallen upon our mutual friend. How—how is he bearing up against it?"

A LITTLE falter in the voice, as at the thought of Dick, a wave of emotional tenderness came over the speaker, a sudden moistening of the beautiful eyes, which a moment before had seemed so hard in their brilliancy, went far to outweigh in the young girl's mind the previous artificiality, the note of insincerity which she had been quick to detect, and which had made her almost regret her coming.

"It has nearly overwhelmed him!" she replied with quivering lips: "at times I have trembled for his reason! That is why I feel he must, at all costs, be saved from any added worry; that is why it is impossible for me to appeal to him in a matter which concerns us both. Puzzled and uncertain how best to act in the emergency which has arisen, I consulted Mr. Alston, and he advised me to come to you for help."

"Indeed!"

The tone was not encouraging; once more a doubt as to the wisdom of her visit disturbed Enid, but she had gone too far to retreat.

"A few days ago," she explained, "I received an anonymous letter, obviously meant to damage Dick in my estimation. That it could not do, of course," she hastily added; "but still it troubled me. It is horrible to me to think that he and I have a secret enemy lurking in the background! I feel that I shall have no rest, night or day, till I have torn the

mask from the hidden face. The letter bore a London post-mark; and your son thought that—as your circle of friends and Dick's was the same—you might possibly be able to give some clue which would enable me to find the writer."

A dull red flush rose to Mrs. Alston's cheeks.

"I cannot see why Ted should imagine that," she replied quickly. "I have seen nothing of Mr. Emberson for the last ten months."

"No, but before that time," urged Enid; "before he and I had ever met, he was constantly at your house, was he not? You knew most of the people with whom he came in contact?"

"I knew many of them certainly; but no doubt there were others I did not know. The lives of most young men contain secret pages."

"There were none, I am sure, in Dick's which need fear the light of day!" exclaimed Enid with a proud lifting of the golden head.

"Ah! you are at the age at which one expects all men to be Bayards, all women saints," was the caustic retort. "I have learnt, by sad experience, that the sinners predominate in both sexes."

The speaker's tone grated indescribably upon Enid.

"We need not enter into that," she said gently. "We are all fallible, of course; but I could not love Dick as I do if I were not convinced that he is an honourable man. I came to you as one of his best friends—was I wrong in so doing? Will you not help me to find this hidden slanderer?"

"Have you the letter with you?" asked Mrs. Alston carelessly, "it is of course possible that I might recognize the writing."

"It is printed."

"Ah! that enhances the difficulty; still perhaps the style or context may betray the identity of the writer."

ENID handed the letter across; and Denise made a show of reading it, whilst inwardly debating what her plan of action should be. Her enemy had delivered herself into her hands, she reflected, with an inward glow of triumph; it was for her to make the most of this un hoped-for opportunity—to strike a blow for her own happiness; if it found its mark in the heart of an innocent girl, why should she regret it? Were not the latter's youth and beauty so many offences against her? Had she not herself suffered enough?

"Poor woman!" she murmured under her breath. The words seemed to have escaped her lips involuntarily, for she gave a little start as if fearing she had betrayed herself, and turned her eyes away from the other's questioning gaze.

"You know her then?" said Enid, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to steady.

"Do you wish for the truth?" asked Mrs. Alston, turning on her sharply.

Her tone was ominous. The fugitive rose-tints faded from her listener's face, leaving her white as any snow-maiden; but she answered bravely—

"Yes; it is the truth I seek."

"Well, then, the identity of the writer of this letter is to me but thinly veiled. I am sorry for her; I have called her friend, and therefore I cannot betray her to you; but, if you like, I will tell you her story."

A childish impulse came over Enid to press her fingers in her ears and fly precipitately from the woman to whom she had come for aid—from the woman whose eyes as they met hers were full of a smouldering enmity. A forewarning of calamity chilled her with its icy breath; but she had gone too far to retreat. Speech at that moment was

(Continued on page 25.)

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