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Zelda Dameron

By
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

There was no mistaking the gleam that lighted the old man's eyes.

"Who's your purchaser?" he asked.

"I think I've mentioned to you the Patoka Land and Improvement Company. We've decided not to confine ourselves to our flat scheme alone. We're going to handle big real estate schemes wherever we see anything good enough and big enough to make it worth while. That wasn't our intention at first, but I've persuaded our people to see it that way. All the big fortunes in this country have been made in real estate, and the possibilities haven't been exhausted yet. If we can hit a fair price, we'll take your lots and work them off in our own way; but I shouldn't bother with the thing at all if it weren't that I hope to get that creek strip from you."

"Who are in your company?" asked the old man. His need for cash was great, but he tried to conceal his anxiety, and he was really curious to know who were behind Balcomb.

The promoter reeled off a long list of names, most of them unknown to Dameron, but Balcomb's ready explanation imparted stability to all of them. There were half a dozen country bankers and a number of men who were or had been State officers.

"You seem to have drawn largely on the country," remarked the old man, dryly.

"You are quite right, I did. It's easier. There's lots of money in these country banks that's crying for investment. I know a lot of business houses right here in our jobbing district that go to the country for their loans. These old Mariona bankers have never got over the panic of '73. Every time they make a loan they make an enemy. A man whose credit is A1 doesn't like to have to go over his past and the history of his wife's relations even unto the third and fourth generation every time he borrows a few thousand dollars. Not much!"

Dameron laughed, a little uneasily, but he laughed. Two years before he would have shuddered at such heresy.

"Well," said Balcomb, rising, "you think over the matter and let me know whether you care to sell. I'll give you one thousand dollars for an option on the creek strip at sixty thousand. I'll see you in a few days."

"No! No!" The old man's voice rose querulously. Delays were dangerous. If Balcomb could do it he must effect the sale at once.

"The figure I named yesterday," began Dameron.

"—is out of the question," said Balcomb, with finality.

"Then nine hundred dollars apiece for the block of lots."

"Perfectly absurd." And Balcomb turned toward the door.

The old man rose and rested against his desk heavily. His bent figure was wholly pitiful; the claw-like fingers on which he leaned trembled so that his thin, worn body shook.

"Suppose you name a figure, Mr. Balcomb," he said, with a pathetic attempt at jauntiness.

"I am authorized to close at twenty thousand cash; and my commission comes out of that. We'll say fifteen hundred commission. But I am not anxious to buy at that price—it's quite immaterial to me. What I want is the option."

"I have better use for the money; yes, I can use it to advantage," said Dameron, as though he were pondering the matter gravely and seeking to justify himself.

Balcomb took a step toward him.

"In other real estate, by the terms of the trust," he said, smiling in an insinuating way.

"Yes; yes, of course," said Dameron, hastily.

"And there's the order of court."

"To be sure—there's an order of court required by the terms of the trust. I suppose you wouldn't mind waiting a little for that. The trust expires in a few weeks—I prefer to go to the judge with the whole settlement at once."

"But you prefer not to go to the judge to ask his approval of this particular deed. All right. The abstract needn't show these requirements—our attorney will not be particular. I'll fix that for you."

"Yes, you can arrange that, I suppose," said the old man, weakly. He was trembling now, visibly, and his voice shook.

"That will be worth five hundred more—as special commission and guaranty that you won't forget the court's approval," said Balcomb, coolly.

"No, oh, no!" wailed the old man. "I'm giving it away. You are taking unfair advantage. I am not well—I am not quite myself to-day."

He sank into his chair, breathing hard; but he recovered instantly and smiled at Balcomb with an effort.

"I'm not a man to back out when I have pledged my word," he said, grandly. "A trade's a trade." And Balcomb grinned.

"Now, one other thing, Mr. Dameron. I'll be square with you and tell the truth. I've got to have the option on the creek strip. My people are not a bit crazy to buy lots like these, but our apartment scheme is a big thing, and to get your strip of ground out there on the creek bank we're willing to buy these lots of yours—just, as the fellow said, to show there's no hard feeling."

"At seventy-five thousand for the creek strip. Not a cent less. It's a part of the trust. It's my daughter's. I shall not give it away. There are only a few weeks more in which I shall have any right to sell—and—and I have had another offer," he ended, weakly.

"Quite likely; but it isn't so easy to get so much cash on short notice. And there's the difficulty of finding other real estate to reinvest the money in, and the order of court and all that."

Balcomb stroked his beard and eyed his prey. He dropped the suggestion about the reinvestment of the proceeds in real estate merely to show his acquaintance with the terms of the trust. It amused him to remember Ezra Dameron's old reputation as a hard customer. He was proving, in Balcomb's own phrase, almost too easy.

"We'll call it twenty thousand, then, for the block of lots," said the old man, smiling and rubbing his hands.

"Very well," said Balcomb, "with two thousand as my fee in the matter; and an option to buy the creek strip at sixty thousand."

The old man stared at him with a sudden malevolent light in his eyes, but he said with exaggerated dignity:

"Very well, Mr. Balcomb."

Dameron drew from his desk an abstract of title covering the Roger Merriam addition. It was in due form, the work of a well-known title company. Balcomb took it and ran his eye through its crisp pages.

So the next afternoon a deed was filed with the county recorder, conveying the block of lots to the Patoka Land and Improvement Company, Ezra Dameron receiving eighteen thousand dollars as consideration and J. Arthur Balcomb two thousand dollars as commission. Opportunities to make two thousand so easily were not to be put aside, and Balcomb's conscience troubled him not at all over the transaction. Van Cleve, the vice president and attorney, did exactly what Balcomb, the treasurer, told him to do without question; and when Balcomb expressed himself as satisfied that the court's approval would be forthcoming shortly when the whole estate was settled, and that weanwhile the deed should be recorded, Van Cleve readily acquiesced. Balcomb told his associates that it was the only way in which Dameron would give the option.

Balcomb did not, of course, tell his associates that he was accepting a commission from Dameron; for there were times when J. Arthur Balcomb's volubility gave way to reticence of the austerest kind. He plumed himself upon at last having secured at sixty thousand dollars an option on the creek strip, where the ideal apartment house was to be built; and he sent notices to his directors of a meeting to consider plans for building. The fact that the company had just bought, through his shrewd agency, something like fifty thousand dollars' worth of lots for twenty thousand would, he told Van Cleve, "look good to the jays," and it did.

CHAPTER XVII.

Copeland, the lawyer who never practiced, reached the Tippecanoe Club every week-day at exactly thirty minutes past twelve o'clock. A good figure of a man was Copeland. He had steady brown eyes in which a keen humor lurked; and his hair that had once been black was now white; but he was still young and the snowy cap over his dark features was becoming. In a frock coat Copeland would have graced the Senate or the President's cabinet table. He had telephoned Leighton to meet him one day near the end of September.

"Nothing? You reject my offer?" asked Copeland. "It's better so at your age. When I was in the practice——"

"That was in the day," said Morris, "when a law library in these parts meant the State decisions and a few text-books."

Copeland continued to speak with characteristic crispness.

"I have a customer up in the country who has made the acquaintance of your particular friend, Mr. Jack Balcomb. Do you follow me?"

"Your customer must be a man of parts. Balcomb does not cultivate people unless he sees something pretty good in them."

"I believe that is correct. Well, my customer, whose name is Jennings, has bought some stock in what is known as the Patoka Land and Improvement Company, of which Balcomb is treasurer and one thing and another. There's a lawyer up there in his building——"

"Van Cleve," suggested Leighton.

"That's the chap. His eyes look like a bowl of clam broth. He's the attorney for the company. The reason he holds the job is not difficult to determine. His father is a banker down here on the river somewhere and is well-to-do. Balcomb, I understand, is teaching Van Cleve how things are done in large cities."

"He's a competent teacher. Go on."

"A client of your office is also in the game to a certain extent. I refer to Ezra Dameron, that genial, warm-hearted, impulsive old fossil. They tell me on the quiet that he's been monkeying with options. He's selling this company the old Roger Merriam property south of town at half its value and he's given them an option on his strip of land out here on the creek. You know Balcomb's scheme. He's going to build an ideal flat out here at the edge of town—fountains playing everywhere, roof gardens, native forest trees—it's a delightful prospect. Dameron's corner is a great place for it. It makes no difference whether the scheme is practicable or not. Balcomb makes it sound awfully good. It's been written up in the newspapers most seductively. It's so good that only the elect can get in."

"I know Balcomb and his habits of thought. How much is he paying Dameron for that property?"

"Balcomb has an option at sixty thousand. Jennings told me that the stockholders had already paid in most of their money so that the purchase could be made at once. The price is amazingly low. He must be hard up. Balcomb tells Jennings and the rest of them that he bought these lots merely to be able to get that creek strip; but is's a bargain and they'll make a good thing out of the lots. But what's the matter with Ezra? I thought perhaps Carr's relations with Dameron were such that this information would interest you. The property is part of the Margaret Dameron trusteeship and I hope Miss Dameron will get all she's entitled to. I believe that's the most curious will that was ever probated in our county," Copeland continued, with the exaggerated gravity with which he talked of legal matters. "But that woman certainly had an extraordinary faith in her husband. Nobody else in this township would trust Ezra Dameron round the corner with a hot base-burner. But Mrs. Dameron was as proud as Lucifer. She was a Merriam and she must have thought that by leaving her property to Ezra in trust for their daughter she would put a corner-stone under his honor. But the trusteeship expires on the first of October and the old man is selling property at a ridiculous figure to a crook. It looks rather queer, doesn't it?"

"Dameron must have had something of his own; he had his wife's property to play with and if he hasn't done well with it it's his own fault. I'm sorry that he has fallen into Balcomb's hands."

"Oh, well; you can't make a silk purse out of a sardine's tail," observed Copeland, reflectively. "And I fear that Ezra is a sardine."

When Morris reached his office, he found a first draft of Margaret Dameron's will, written in lead pencil on a faded piece of manila paper, in Carr's small regular hand. Leighton had come upon it once in cleaning out an old desk, and he had put it among his own papers as an interesting specimen of Carr's handiwork. He unfolded the sheets now and examined intently the form of the will. The terms were clear and unequivocal; he noted the change of word and phrase here and there, in every case an improvement in the interest of directness and clarity. There was no question as to the meaning of the will. Real estate was not to be sold except by permission of the court; and proceeds were to be reinvested in other realty. There was good sense in the idea, but had Dameron sold the Roger Merriam addition entire to the Patoka Company without referring the sale to the court?

The question must be answered, and he went to the court house and asked permission of the recorder to look at the deed from Ezra Dameron, trustee, to the Patoka Land and Improvement Company. It was in the hands of a clerk for transcribing, but Morris was allowed to examine it. It was written in Dameron's hand, and had been copied from a printed form of trustee's deed. The consideration was twenty thousand dollars, the receipt of which was duly acknowledged. Leighton was a lawyer and he felt a lawyer's disgust with the situation that the case presented. Dameron was clearly in serious need of ready money or he would not be selling real estate at a ridiculous figure. It was also patent that in his necessity he had turned to Balcomb as a man who would not scruple at oblique practices.

Morris went the next day to the office of a title company where he was acquainted and waited while the secretary made up a list of the property held by Ezra Dameron, trustee. He found that the sale of the Roger Merriam addition, which had just been reported, left the creek property, The Beeches and the old Marriam homestead the only realty remaining in the trust.

"I thought Mr. Dameron was a heavy real estate owner," remarked Morris.

"That's a popular superstition," said the secretary; "but he's sold it off rapidly during the past two years. He owns nothing personally, and he has been converting his daughter's property very fast. I hope there's nothing wrong about it."

"I don't know. Are you sure he hasn't been buying other real estate? Something of the kind is required by the terms of his wife's will."

"Not in this county at least." The secretary was silent for a moment. "It would be a delicious irony if Ezra were to turn up broke, wouldn't it?" he said, grinning.

"That depends on the point of view," remarked Morris.

(To be continued.)

FISHING IN THE CONWAY.

An Angler Who Hooked a Trout and Landed a Cow.

An incident of a somewhat amusing nature was witnessed a few days ago near the Gower bridge, Llanrwst. It appears that a visitor armed with rod and line was plying the gentle art and enticing the wily trout by insinuating his flies on the placid surface of the deep pool which forms that portion of the Conway river.

Above him on a high bank stood a cow. Suddenly a big trout rose like a flash and secured one of the flies, with the result that the reel immediately began to whirr.

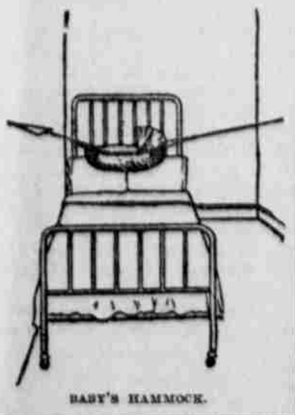
The angler, with galvanic suddenness, jumped back and struck. His unexpected maneuver, however, startled the cow, with the result that she slipped and with a somersault and a heartrending "Moo!" fell with a mighty splash into the pool beneath.

The rod was struck from the angler's hand and after a few spasmodic movements floated gently down stream, while the trout, adapting himself to such favorable opportunity, disgorged the indigestible mockery on the hook and dashed out of the zone of danger and turmoil. The angler, who had undergone the pleasures of a generous shower bath, having collected his scattered thoughts and convinced himself that he was not implicated in the throes of a violent earthquake, hurled a torrent of theological terms on the innocent cow, which was making futile efforts to regain terra firma.

It soon became evident, however, that the animal was drowning, so the angler, with the generosity of his kind, called for assistance, and ultimately the half drowned cow was rescued by means of ropes. It is anticipated that the angler when he next visits his club in England will regale the company with reminiscences of his fishing exploit in the Conway when he hooked a trout and landed a cow.—Field.

Hammock for the Baby.

A substitute for baby's cradle has been invented by a Tennessee man in the form of a hammock, adapted to be hung over the parents' bed. This hammock is so designed that it combines perfect comfort for the occupant with perfect safety and is within easy reach of the mother if baby



BABY'S HAMMOCK.

needs attention. The body portion of the hammock is a boat-shaped affair of some flexible material and laces together at the end. A hood shelters the head of the device and a belt passes around it and serves the double purpose of keeping the infant from falling out and keeping his covers on. Ropes are attached to each end of the hammock and their other extremities fastened to hooks in the opposite walls. Thus suspended the hammock swings over the bed in full view of the child's parents, who can rock it as they lie abed and with much less trouble than it takes to rock the ordinary cradle. When not in use the hammock takes up no more room than the space required to hang it on a hook in the closet

MILADY OF THE FORTUNES

By PHILIP KEAN

(Copyright, 1910, by Associated Literary Press.)

The dust was thick on the long white road; sun and glare and heat held the noonday world in bondage. Even the birds were languid as they sat with drooped wings on the fence rails. On the grass by the roadside a woman lay asleep, half hidden by the bushes. Now and then a cart with a slow horse and drowsy driver rattled by. Nothing disturbed the woman, however, until there came from the distance the "honk, honk" of an automobile horn. At the unusual sound in this far country she sat up. When the big car reached the blackberry bushes in the fence corner, she was at the roadside, her hand held up. At her signal the car stopped.

"What do you want?" asked the man who sat beside the chauffeur.

"Let me tell your fortune." Her great eyes pleaded, supplementing the softness of her voice.

From the back seat came a protest. "Why should he stop here in the heat, Oswald?"

The man was studying the girl's face. "It will take only a moment," he said.

Again the feminine voice protested. "Give her some money and we will go on."

The girl by the roadside cast a

She Sat Up.

glance at the girl in the auto. "I do not take money for nothing," she said. "Let me tell your fortune."

An older feminine voice urged the necessity of going on. "Indeed, Oswald, you are inconsiderate to stop here in the heat."

The young man, still held by the eyes of the girl in the roadside, proposed a compromise. "Let's get out and eat our lunch back there in the woods. It looks cool under the trees."

The fortune teller made an eager confirmation. "It is cool," she said, "and there is a spring among the rocks."

A murmur of distaste from the girl in the tonneau was followed by the older woman's decision. "We are all hungry, why not?"

The young man, questioning the girl by the roadside, appointed her their guide. "Show us the way into the wood and help us to find the spring."

She went ahead of them lightly, a picturesque figure—tall and slender, with a mass of red gold hair in a faded gown of blue. Her wide hat was crowned by a wreath of wheat and a band of scarlet poppies drooped in her hand.

Even the girl who had protested was forced to admit the beauty of the spot upon which they finally came. It was a place of greenness and of dimness, of murmuring water and of crooning winds.

"There is actually a breeze," the older woman said. "One scarcely felt it in the sun." The chauffeur unpacked the lunch hamper, spread a white cloth on a flat rock and set thereon a feast fit for the gods. The eyes of the fortune teller followed every movement, but when Oswald filled a plate with good things and handed it to her she drew back. "Not unless you let me tell your fortune."

"Come, Oswald," an impatient voice interposed.

"In a moment, Sylvia. I am going to have my fortune told."

"Oswald!" This time it was the older woman's voice.

The fortune teller bent over his hand eagerly. She told him many trivial things at first, things at which Sylvia and her mother smiled. At last, however, she spoke of deeper matters, of business and of marriage and he gazed at her in wonder.

"How did you know these things?" he demanded.

"I know—" her voice was tremulous, but suddenly she lifted her head and her eyes flashed. "There are things—things that I cannot tell you now." She looked at the two women and he understood.

"Some other time, then?" he murmured.

She nodded. "Is it worth my lunch?"

"Indeed, yes," and he brought her all the delicacies upon which the others were feasting, the roast fowl, the salad, the sandwiches, the cold sparkling drinks.

When she had finished, she stood up and said: "Good-by."

He followed her for a little distance and demanded:

"When will you tell me the rest of my fortune?"

A little troubled look fluttered across her face. "Somewhere, sometime," she said and fled.

He went back to find the blond Sylvia in a bad temper. She complained of everything, blaming the girl by the roadside for their stop in this lonely place. "Let's leave it as soon as possible," she argued.

It was a long drive before they reached the country house that was their destination. They were just in time to dress for dinner and Oswald came down to find waiting for him a tall, slender girl whose mass of red-gold hair lay against the ivory of her neck. Her filmy chiffon gown trailed behind her in snowy folds. The band of pearls that held her shining locks was matched by other pearls that fell in ropes almost to her knees.

He gazed in astonishment. "You?" he asked sharply.

Her face showed no sign of recognition. "I don't understand," she said.

He bowed, consenting thus to her deception.

Sylvia and her mother stared and gasped as they, too, recognized the personality of their fellow-guest. But only once during the dinner did the lady of the red-gold locks lose the air of fine unconsciousness that enveloped her. It was when they spoke of lunch. "You were not here," her hostess said, and the transformed fortune teller had the grace to blush and murmur that she had eaten it elsewhere.

"Later, Orwald made her confess.

"Why do you try to convince me that I do not know you?" he asked her when he had her safe on the moonlighted porch. "My heart would know you anywhere." Then tremulously. "Perhaps you think I deserve them."

"It was all such a wild freak," she admitted later. "How was I to know that you were coming here? Last night we were talking of poverty, of what one might do to obtain a meal if one had not a cent in the world. It came to me then that I had never earned anything in my life and I had a fancy to see if I could do it. I had often told fortunes to my friends, so I put on a faded old gown and went down that quiet road and waited for some one to come. Then I fell asleep and it was your auto that waked me."

"It was fate," he interpolated.

"After I got into it I was humiliated, yet I went on to the end because I wanted to know what a girl would have to do who really had to earn what she ate. I thought that I should never see you again—and then to find you here!"

"It was fate," he repeated. "But you did not tell me the end of my fortune."

"How could I?" she said. "Your hand said that you must not marry a blond woman, and there was a blond young lady eating lunch with you. I could not tell such a rude fortune."

He looked blank. "Oh, Sylvia is just a friend—but I hope to marry a blond woman."

His tone was so significant that she blushed. "That is," he amended, "if red-gold hair can be called blond."

Her head went up proudly. "I think," she reproved, "that you are presuming."

He leaned toward her. "I have said it is fate. We cannot escape it. Do you wish to escape it, dear lady of fortunes?"

She shook her head. "I am not sure, and anyhow, it was a fake fortune—such things don't come true."

"You can't get out of it that way," he said. "You promised that I should marry. There is only one woman that I want. May I try to win her?"

And looking up into his eager eyes she promised, "Yes."

American "Slouchiness."

Public untidiness is a national fault. It is more noticeable in cities, by its massing there than elsewhere, but even the roadsides in the "sweet, pure country" are often terribly unkempt and have the air of being made a convenient dumping ground. H. G. Wells, when in this country, was much struck in his railroad journeys by the slovenly look of village streets and by the appalling amount of waste matter everywhere flung about. We have so long been used to having all outdoors in which to throw things that we are in danger of forgetting how much like the neighborhood of a Zulu kraal we often make our outlying regions appear. Travelers from abroad are invariably impressed by this, and not favorably, while many a returned American tourist, after a sojourn in neat France, for example, is painfully struck by what one patriotic youth called the "slouchy" appearance of his own land.

Ridiculous European Laws.

A decision of the courts at Trieste is causing great indignation among young people in Austria. Henceforward lovers will be liable to a summons for lese majesty if they vary the official position of a postage stamp, whether on a card or on a letter, to indicate their sentiments. To stick a postage stamp at a certain angle to express "undying love," "disappointment," "tender memories" and so forth is decidedly a mark of disrespect to the sovereign, say the courts. The sender of a post card at Cattaro who had used the emperor's effigy to tell his sweetheart that he would love her always has been condemned and fined for the offense.—London Express.

The Magic of a Smile.

The expression of our face is of so great importance that we must watch it closely, so as to give happiness to all around us, but above all to the beloved best. A cross look, a mere frown, has often been the beginning of much bitterness of heart and sorrow between lovers, says Woman's Life. A smile demands so slight an effort, and has such great power. In a woman, especially, charm of expression is everything.

Town Crier.

A quaint survivor of colonial days is the town crier of Provincetown. This official, once found in every New England town, now survives only in Provincetown and in Nantucket. He is on the street almost daily in Provincetown announcing a show at the town hall, a cake sale at a church, grand bargains at the shops, or new reels at the motion picture show.

True Form of Charity.

The charity that thinketh no evil trusts in God and trusts in men.—Timothy Titcomb.

Powerful British Windmill.

What is claimed as the largest and most powerful windmill in Great Britain has just been completed at Willesden, where its capacity is being tried under varying conditions. It is intended for a farm near Bristol, its use there being to generate electricity, supply power to run crushing machinery and work the pumps. From the trials made it is said this new wind machine is capable of generating sufficient electricity for 300 lights, to crush oats and grind maize, work an electric lift, cook the food and heat a room at a cost of ½d a unit.

Lived in One House 94 Years.

In the village of Stathe (Somerset) on the banks of the River Parrett, resides William Broome, who has lived the whole of his life—ninety-four years—in the same cottage. The house is his own property. Broome has always enjoyed good health, is still very active and has never tasted medicine. He is a great-grandfather, grandfather and father, but only six of his descendants are living.—London Evening Standard.

Peculiar Church Ornament.

Lambeth "Old" church has numerous historic monuments, and in one of the windows is the full length figure of a peddler with his pack, staff and dog. This is supposed to represent the unknown person who presented "Peddler's Acre" to the parish upon condition that his portrait and that of his beloved canine companion should be preserved in the church and that his dog should be buried in consecrated ground.—Pall Mall Gazette.

This Is Rather Neat.

An English critic of American social conditions says that men in this country are too much inclined to put women on pedestals. The only answer to such criticism is pity for the nation that has not such a beautifully decorative use for pedestals.

Dismal Outlook.

"Do you believe we shall ever have universal peace?" "Not unless women quit offering higher wages to their neighbors' cooks."

Not an Improvement.

Gerald—"People like to walk over me." Geraldine—"I don't see why they should; you hardly come under the head of improved pavement."

ASSIST YOUR WEAK STOMACH

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