

Zelda Dameron

By
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued.)

"There's Mr. Balcomb over there," Zelda remarked, casually. "He sings divinely, doesn't he? Don't you think he sings divinely?" and she looked at Morris suddenly, with a provoking air of gravity.

"I'm sure he was a De Reszko in some former incarnation," said Morris, savagely.

"That was just what I was thinking, only I hadn't the words to express it," said Zelda, with a mockery of joy at finding they were in accord.

"I'm glad, then, that we can agree about something, even when we're both undoubtedly wrong."

"I don't like to think that I can be wrong," said Zelda. "And it isn't in the least flattering for you to suggest such a thing. I shall have to speak to my Uncle Rodney about you."

"Any interest you may take in me will be appreciated."

Jack had crossed the room, giving what he called the cheering jolly to several young women on the way, and he turned quickly:

"At your service, Miss Dameron"—and he bowed impressively.

"Mr. Leighton is crazy about your singing. He is just waiting for a chance to congratulate you. But he's very unhappy to-night. Words fail him." And she shook her head and looked into Balcomb's grinning face as though this were a great grief between them.

"What kind of a jolly is this? I say, Morris, you look like first and second grave-digger done into one. We're not playing Hamlet now. But I can tell you, Miss Dameron, that when Brother Leighton—he belongs to my frat, hence the brother—did Hamlet over at our dear old alma mater, the gloom that settled down on that township could have been cut up into badges of mourning enough to have supplied Spain through her little affair with these States. That's Walt Whitman—"these States." Do you know, I was Ophelia to his Hamlet, and if I do say it myself, I was a sweet thing in Ophelia."

"I don't doubt you were, Mr. Balcomb," said Zelda.

"There was just one thing lacking in your impersonation," declared Leighton; "you ought to have been drowned in the first scene of the first act to have made it perfect."

"No, violence, gentlemen, I beg of you!" And Zelda hurried across the room to where Herr Schmidt was assembling the principals.

"Say, that girl has got the art of stringing down fine. She seems to have you going all right. You look like twenty-nine cents at a thirty-cent bargain counter. But you take it too hard. I wish she'd string me! They're never so much interested as when they throw you on your face and give you the merry tra la. I tell you I've had experience with the sex all right, and I know!"

"Yes, I remember your flirtations with the girls that waited on table at the college boarding-house. You had a very cheering way with them."

Balcomb's eyes were running restlessly over the groups of young people. He was appraising and fixing them in his mind as he talked. His joy in being among them—these representative young people of the city, whose names he knew well from long and diligent perusal of the personal and society column of the daily papers—amused Leighton; but the fellow's self-satisfaction irritated him, too.

The chorus had been drilled apart, and this was the first time Morris had heard the principals sing. He had joined the chorus under protest, but Mrs. Carr had insisted, and when he learned that Zelda was to be the star it had not been difficult to comply. She began now one of her songs.

When the last notes died away, Balcomb stepped out at the director's nod and began the answering song. Balcomb usually amused Morris; but the fellow struck upon him discordantly. Zelda was laughing at Balcomb's antics as he began to sing with fervor and a real sense of the dramatic requirements. As he neared the end, where Zelda and he sang together the duet that ended the first half of the opera, Zelda put up her hands, and he took them, gazing into her eyes with a fine lover-like air. Their voices soared into the climax without a break, while the director threw himself into strange contortions as he struck the last bars leading to the high note which they gained and held perfectly. The dress rehearsal was fixed for the next night.

"It simply can't fail!" declared Mrs. Carr to Leighton. "Miss Dameron could carry it alone if every one else should break down."

"That is altogether true," said Morris. He was glaring at Balcomb, whose joy in being a member of the cast was hard to bear.

CHAPTER IX.

"Deceivers Ever" was presented, with no more delays and slips than usually befall amateur performances, before an audience that tested the capacity of the Athenaeum. It was a great occasion for Mrs. Carr, as she had undoubtedly taken the Dramatic Club when its life was ebbing fast and made a living thing of it. She sat in the

wings holding the prompt-book and prepared for any fate.

"Let us speak to Zee and then escape," said Merriam to his sister, as the chairs were being pushed back for the dance that was to follow the play. A few older people were there and they formed a little colony by themselves. Zelda came out presently from the dressing-room, with her arms full of flowers that had been passed across the footlights, and she bore Olive Merriam with her.

"Don't be afraid; not in the least afraid," Zelda said to her cousin as she hastened across the hall to her aunt and uncle.

"Please don't," urged Olive. "It isn't kind to me."

"No danger at all; they're all perfectly amiable when you know how to manage them."

"Aunt Julia, this is a real compliment! Thanks very much. This is Olive Merriam. And Uncle Rodney, here's the star, to whom I expect you to say something particularly nice. Mr. Merriam, Miss Merriam"—and Zelda smiled at the old gentleman bowed low over the hand of his brother's daughter.

"Olive Merriam," said Zelda, "is my cousin and my very dearest friend."

Olive was not afraid. She smiled at Rodney Merriam; and there was something very winning in Olive Merriam's smile. Zelda looked demurely at her aunt, who seemed alarmed lest something unpleasant might happen; but Rodney Merriam laughed, half at finding himself caught, and half at the sight of Olive Merriam's blue eyes, her glowing cheeks with their furtive dimples and the fair hair that Zelda was now compelling her to wear in the prevailing mode.

"I am delighted; I am proud of you," he declared, quite honestly.

"I think—I may say that I reciprocate," replied Olive. "I haven't seen you for a long time—Uncle Rodney—except at a distance."

"Altogether my fault and my loss! I trust that the distance may be considerably lessened hereafter."

A number of people were watching this by-play with keen interest. Something had surely happened among the Merriams. It had been many years since so many members of the family had been seen together at any social gathering.

"There's a draft somewhere," said Mrs. Forrest, suddenly. "We must be going, Rodney. And now, Zelda, don't stay out all night. Mrs. Carr is going to take you home. You'll be sure to be sick if you're not careful." And—Zelda was looking at her aunt intently—"Miss Merriam, I do hope you will come to see me. I never go anywhere, you know. And please remember me to your mother."

"And pray remember me, also," said Rodney Merriam, feeling Zelda's eyes upon him.

"Oh, Zee," said her uncle, in a low tone; "it was all fine; but how did Pollock come to be in the show?—I don't care to have you know him."

"Of course I shall know him."

"But I prefer."

"Please don't prefer! I'm having a little fun to-night, and I can't be serious at all. Some other time—good-night!"

"What do you think of that girl?" asked Mrs. Forrest, when she was alone with her brother in their carriage.

"I think she's very pretty. If you refer to Olive Merriam, and has nice manners," was his reply.

"There seems to be no way of checking Zelda's enthusiasms. I hope that girl won't take advantage of Zee's kindness," said Mrs. Forrest, as her brother left her at her door.

"I shouldn't worry about her if I were you."

"I certainly shan't; but you were always down on her father."

"I was always a good deal of a fool, too," said Rodney Merriam; and he refused to be taken home in his sister's carriage, but walked homeward from her door through High street, beating the walk reflectively with his stick.

At the Athenaeum Zelda was enjoying herself unreservedly. Her cousin Olive had been presented to a representative Marlona audience in a way that had commanded attention, and Zelda was thoroughly happy over it. She did not care in the least what people might say about the healing of old wounds among the Merriams. It gave her the only unalloyed joy of her home-coming to see Olive established socially on a footing that was, she told herself, as firm as her own.

Balcomb, who was much swollen with pride by his success in the opera, was talking in his usual breathless fashion to a young friend from the country whom he had asked to witness his triumph. Beyond Pollock's head Zelda could see Balcomb's profile, though she could not hear him. "She's a regular piece, that girl. I was scared to death for fear she'd throw me in that duet—we'd never sung it together—but I carried it through all right. She's that stunning Miss Dameron's cousin. She's rather stuck on me, I'm afraid—I've done little things for her—theater and so on, but I'll have to cut it all out. She's amusing, but I can't afford to have her misunderstand my attentions. When a fellow finds that he's got a girl down fine she ceases to be interesting. It's

the pursuit that's amusing; but when they begin to expect something—Cunning? well, I should say!"

Pollock heard him distinctly, and he shut his eyes two or three times in a quick way that he had when angry, though he kept on talking to Zelda about the evening's performance.

"I'm afraid you're jealous of Mr. Balcomb. He got more applause than anybody."

"He deserved all he got for making such a monkey of himself."

"He's a man of courage; he probably thought he could afford to do it."

"All of that?" said Pollock.

"A rising young man," continued Zelda.

"A person, I should say, of most egregious and monumental gall"—and Zelda laughed at his earnestness. She had not heard Balcomb's remark about her cousin, but she knew he had said something that irritated Pollock. That young officer left her quickly when Leighton came up for the dance that had now begun.

Pollock found Balcomb in a moment. The promoter was standing at the side of the hall, his eyes nervously searching for the girl with whom he had engaged the dance.

"Mr. Balcomb," said Pollock, at his elbow, "may I speak to you a moment?"

"Certainly," said Balcomb, in his usual amiable fashion. "Only I'm engaged for this dance and have lost my partner."

"That's my own fix," declared Pollock, "but my errand is brief. Let us step out here."

He led the way to a door opening upon the main stairway of the building and they paused there, Pollock with his back to the door, facing Balcomb. He carried one glove in his hand and was very trim and erect in his evening clothes.

"Mr. Balcomb, I was so unfortunate as to overhear your conversation of a moment ago—with some one I didn't know, but that doesn't matter—in which you referred to a young lady—a young lady who came here to-night under your escort, in terms that a gentleman would not use."

"As a confessed eavesdropper I don't believe it is necessary for you to say anything further," said Balcomb, with heat, and he took a step toward the door of the assembly-room.

Pollock touched him on the shoulder with the tips of his fingers, very lightly. Balcomb was half a head taller and much bulkier, but the tips of Pollock's fingers seemed to carry a certain insistence, and Balcomb drew back.

"I shall hold you responsible for this, you—"

"I certainly hope you will. As I was saying, you referred to a young lady, who was here under your protection, in terms which no one but a contemptible cur would use of a woman—"

Balcomb's arm went up and he struck at Pollock with his fist. The officer stood as he had been, but the glove in his right hand slapped smartly upon Balcomb's face, and Balcomb took an involuntary step backward down the stairway.

"In the part of the country that I came from, Mr. Balcomb," Pollock continued in an easy conversational tone, "we do very pleasant things to bright and captivating people of your stripe"—he took another step forward, and Balcomb, a little white in the face, retreated again—"but in this instance"—Pollock lifted his left hand to his shadowy moustache and gave it a twist; he took another step and Balcomb yielded before him—"I shall let you off with unwarranted leniency."

Balcomb, forced another step downward, had grown red with fury, and again struck at Pollock, but with the result that Balcomb stumbled and retreated two steps instead of one, reaching a landing. With this more secure footing he gained courage.

"You little cur, you little—" he blustered, drawing his face down so that he could glare into Pollock's eyes.

"Yes," said Pollock, calmly; "I have been called little before; so that your statement lacks novelty. As I was saying"—and he leaned against the stair-rail with the tips of the fingers of his gloved hand thrust into his trousers pocket, and holding the other glove in his right hand—"I haven't time now to go into the matter further, but I am always at your service. It will give me great pleasure to make your excuses to Miss Merriam, or to any other friends you may be leaving behind you—owing to an illness that made it necessary for you to leave—suddenly. Now you will oblige me by continuing on down to the coat room—unattended. There are probably some gentlemen below there that I should very much dislike to explain matters to."

Balcomb leaped lightly forward as though to make a rush for the door of the assembly-room.

"Try that again," said Pollock, seizing him by the collar, and throwing him back, "and I'll drop you over the banister."

Some men had entered the lower hall from the smoking-room, and Balcomb greeted them cheerily as he turned and went below as though to join them. Pollock stood above waiting for Balcomb to reappear, and as he waited he resumed his glove and buttoned it with care. The wait was nearly over, but he stood there leaning against the stair-rail and beating time to the music with his foot, until he saw Balcomb come out of the coat room clad for the street. When Balcomb looked up, Pollock waved his hand to him graciously, and turned and went back into the hall.

"Miss Merriam," he said, bowing before Olive, "I very much regret to present Mr. Balcomb's compliments and to say that he has been unexpectedly called away—pressing business—and he asked me to do myself the honor to see that you don't get lost. This is our dance."

(To be continued.)

REPARTEE ENDS IN DISASTER

Fresh Young Man in Quick Lunch Room is Unexpectedly Show-ered With Oatmeal.

The young man with the iron cheek entered the quick lunch room and seated himself at the third table.

"Belinda," he called familiarly, "you look fresh this morning."

"Not half as fresh as some others," retorted the pretty waitress with an elevation of her nose.

"Well! Well! Have you calf brains?" "If I did you wouldn't order them, for you have an oversupply now."

"My, but you are getting good for the matinee. With the high price of meats, eggs come in handy these days, don't they?"

"No; they come in crates."

"Wow! Did you ever hear the story of the incubator chick? It's not out yet!"

"That will do, sonny. Did you ever hear the story of the cold porridge? Well, it's on you!"

There was an unexpected tilting of a dish and the young man with the iron cheek was showered with oatmeal.

As Represented.

"See here," growled the fraile man as he entered the jewelry store. "I bought this watch of you last week and paid you \$3 in cash for it. You said it would work like a charm—and it doesn't keep time at all."

"That's all right, my friend," replied the jeweler calmly. "Neither does a charm."

Their Desperation.

Worthington—Do the subscribers to Turgler's Weekly seem to appreciate the paper?

Slappers—Well, they held a meeting a few days ago and unanimously agreed to offer Turgler \$500 if he would stop sending the publication to them.

Sordid Philosophy.

Maude—Poor Jeannette! Her marriage was a great disappointment to her friends.

Clara—Married beneath her socially, I suppose!

Maude—Oh, no; but her friends all predicted the alliance would turn out unhappily, and it didn't.

Lack of Courage.

Nashfull Browne—I'll give you \$50 if you tell Miss Holmers I want to marry her.

Brassy Benson—Not on your life! She might try to work the John Alden racket on me.

Latest Role.

"Why do you save those old rubber shoes?"

"They are for hungry arctic explorers," replied Mrs. Housekeeper. "Been a good many of 'em along this route."

Hopeless Quest.

Miss Oldham (in bird store)—I'd like to get a parrot that isn't tricky and doesn't swear or use slang.

Dealer—Sorry I can't oblige you, madam. I don't handle stuffed birds.

Literary Inspiration.

"Your novel is evidently the result of inspiration."

"Yes; I didn't start it until after reading the advertising notice my publishers got up."—Washington Herald.

Profitable Peaks.

"The Swiss ought to be very proud of the Alps, as nature's handiwork."

"No doubt, but they ought to be a great deal prouder of the way they make the Alps pay."

To-Day.

If you made mistakes yesterday, forget them. No strength was ever built upon continued regret. To-day is the result of yesterday, but it is more important to remember that to-morrow is the result of to-day.

Pruning Trees.

More trees are harmed than helped by pruning. No man should attempt to prune a tree until he has learned what is to be accomplished by pruning, and how to do it properly.

Does Not Color Hair

Ayer's Hair Vigor, as now made from our new improved formula, does not stain or color the hair even to the slightest degree. Gray hair, white hair, blonde hair is not made a shade darker. But it certainly does stop falling hair. No question about that.

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Law to the Business.

Mrs. Newed—I'd like a couple of yards of steak, please.

Butcher—Pardon me, madam, but since the first of the month we have been selling it only by the pound. What kind of steak would you like?

Mrs. Newed—Rare steak, please. My husband doesn't like it well done.

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Works Both Ways.

"The clarinet," remarked the amateur as he paused to get his second wind, "is the hardest instrument to play."

"Anyway," rejoined his one-man audience, "it can't be any harder to play than it is to listen to."

In the Grand Stand.

Rooter—They ought to take that duffer out of the box! He's got a glass arm!

His Fair Companion—Glass arm? Is that why they call him the pitcher, Harry?

Mothers will find Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup the best remedy to use for their children during the teething period.

He Got Another Job.

"We make it a rule here," said the warden to the new prisoner, "to assign prisoners to the trades with which they are most familiar and will make no exception in your case. What is your occupation?"

"I'm an aeroplane chauffeur," replied the new boarder, as he grinned a gruesome grin.

CASTORIA

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A wild stab of sound made the helpless air waves shudder.

"Great guns, what's that!" cried the man across the way.

"That," replied his wife, "is our neighbor, Miss Screech, slinging at the open window."

The man scowled darkly. "There should be no open season for windows in the Screech family," he grimly declared.

Thought Quickly.

"What is a totem pole?" his wife asked.

"A totem pole," he said, thinking fast, "is the rail—or pole—on which an objectionable citizen is ridden—or toted—out of the community."

Monetony.

Abt Vogler (to choir boys)—Why are you stuffing the organ pipes with cotton, my sons?

Choir Boys (uno voce)—Oh, just to relieve the awful Te Deum.—Yale Record.

Insomnia

"I have been using Cascarets for insomnia, with which I have been afflicted for twenty years, and I can say that Cascarets have given me more relief than any other remedy I have ever tried. I shall certainly recommend them to my friends as being all that they are represented."

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