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Zelda Dameron

By
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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CHAPTER X.

When Zelda asked her father one day where his office was, he answered evasively that it was in the Dameron Block. This was an old-fashioned office building, with a basement and a short stairway leading to the main corridor. It was no longer fashionable, as the better class of lawyers and real estate brokers had sought building of a later type that offered electric lights and elevators. The Dameron Block faced the court-house square, and was the habitat of divers small attorneys and real estate men. In the basement below, a justice of the peace sat in judgment next door to a musty old book-shop, where the proprietor, a quaint figure with a great mop of iron-gray hair, sold pens and paper and legal blanks to Dogberry Row, as this quarter of the street was called.

Zelda strayed into this thoroughfare by chance one winter afternoon shortly before Christmas and was arrested by the sight of some old books in the bookseller's window. The venerable bookseller came out into the barement area and spoke to her of the books, holding a volume meanwhile, with his forefinger closed upon the page he had been reading. Yes; he kept French books, and she went into the shop and looked over his shelves of foreign books.

"There is very little demand for them," he said. "Some of these are rare. Here is a little volume of Hugo's poems; very rare. I should be glad if you would take it for a dollar—any of these poems for a dollar. But of course I can only offer. It is for you to decide."

"I shall take the Hugo," said Zelda. He wrapped it for her carefully, even regretfully, and held the packet for a moment, caressing it with his hands, while she produced a dollar from her purse and took it from him.

"Call again. I have been here for twenty years; Congdon, Dameron Block."

"Yes, Dameron Block," repeated Zelda.

The constables and loungers on the sidewalk in front of the justice's court stared at her as she came out and glanced for a moment at the upper windows of the building. A galvanized iron sign at the eaves bore the name "Dameron Block, 1870," in letters that had long since lost the false aspect of stone given to them originally by gray paint.

Zelda went into the dim entrance and read the miscellaneous signs that were tacked there. One of them was inscribed "E. Dameron, Room 8"; and passing on she presently came to a frosted-glass door, where the same legend was repeated. It was late in the afternoon; possibly her father would go home with her, she thought, and turned the knob.

She entered a dark room on a court-way, evidently used as a place of waiting; there was another room beyond, reached by a door that stood half-open. Her father was engaged; his voice rose from the inner room; and she took a chair by the outer door of the waiting-room. She looked about the place curiously. On a long table lay in great disorder many odds and ends—packages of garden-seed under dust that afforded almost enough earth to sprout them; half a dozen fence pickets tied together with a string; and several strata of old newspapers. On the floor in a corner lay a set of harness in a disreputable state of disrepair; and posted on the walls were yellowed sheets of newspapers containing tables of some sort. Zelda did not know what these were, though any of the loafers on the curbstone could have enlightened her as to their character—they were the official advertisements of the sales of tax titles. Ezra Dameron always "talked poor," and complained of the burden of taxes and street improvements; but he had been the chief buyer of tax titles in the county.

"I'm sure that I've been very lenient, very lenient indeed," Ezra Dameron was saying. "I have, in fact, considered it a family matter, calling for considerate treatment, on the score of my friendship with your husband. If it had been otherwise, I would have been obliged to take steps—steps toward safeguarding the interests—the interests of my trust, I should say."

"But another extension of two years would be sufficient for me to pay. I wish very much for Olive not to know that her schooling was paid for with borrowed money. She gives me all she earns. Her position is assured, and I am putting aside something every month to apply on the debt. We owe nothing else."

"But two of these notes are already in default, Mrs. Merriam. I have incurred obligations on the strength of them. A woman can't understand the requirements and exactions of business."

"I am sorry, very sorry, Mr. Dameron. All I ask is this extension. It can't be a large matter to you!"

"I regret more than I can tell you that it is impossible. If it were myself—if it were my own money that I advanced you, I could perhaps be less insistent, but as it is, this money belongs to another—in fact, it is part of my daughter's estate. She is perfectly helpless, utterly ignorant of business; it is necessary for me to exercise the greatest care in administering her affairs. It is a sacred trust. Mrs. Merriam, a sacred trust from her dear mother."

"I came to-day," said the woman's voice, apologetically, "hoping that payment could be deferred."

"Yes, to be sure; it's wise to be fore-handed. But the loan must be paid at the maturity of the last note, in May. I must close my wife's estate very soon. I have timed all my loans to that end."

The purring voice stole through the anteroom, where Zelda sat forward in her chair, listening with parted lips and wonder and pain in her eyes. The book in her lap fell to the bare floor, making a sharp clatter that startled her. She gave a little gasp and reached for it, scarcely stooping, so intent were her eyes on the door of the inner room; and when she had regained it, she ran into the hall and down the steps to the street.

She felt a great yearning for sympathy, for some one to whom she could confess her misery and heartache. It was growing dark, and when she reached her uncle's house, the lights shone brightly in his library. She knew he was there, and that she could, at a word, make his house her home and shake herself free forever from her father. The was always rebuffing and thwarting her Uncle Rodney in his efforts to help her. But at the gate she paused with her hand on the catch, and hurried on. She came to Mrs. Forrest's house. There, too, a welcome awaited her; but the thought of the overheated rooms, of the cheerless luxury in which her aunt lived, stifled her. She felt no temptation to make any appeal there. She turned into a side street that led to her father's house and walked slowly homeward.

Without putting aside her wraps she dropped a match into the kindling in the fireplace of the living-room, and waited until the flames leaped into the throat of the chimney. Polly was in the dining-room, showing a new assistant how to lay the table for the evening meal, and she came to the folding doors and viewed Zelda with the interest that the girl always had for her. Polly was Zelda's slave, and she went about half the day muttering, and chuckling over what seemed to her Zelda's unaccountable whims.

"Polly," said Zelda, "this is Julius Caesar's birthday—or Napoleon Bonaparte's or the Duke of Argyle's—do you understand?"

The black woman showed all her teeth in appreciation.

"And we'll have out the candlesticks—those very high ones; and you may use that gold-banded china and the real cut glass."

Polly departed chuckling and Zelda went to her room. Her father was reading his newspaper by the fireplace when she came in upon his startled gaze an hour later. She had arrayed herself in a white silk evening gown. He had never before seen her dressed so at their family dinner-table. The long skirt added to her height. Her hair was caught up from her forehead in an exaggeration of the prevailing mode.

"Good evening, father! I thought I'd dress up to-night just for fun, and to get the crinkles out of my things. Isn't this gown a perfect love? It's real Parisian."

She swept past, the rich silk brushing him, and then—Polly having appeared at the door with her eyes staring from her head:

"Now let us feast while we may," she said.

She passed before him into the dining-room with an inclination of her head and to her place. The old man had not spoken and he sat down with painstaking care, finding apparently some difficulty in drawing in his chair. He bowed his head for the silent grace he always said, and raised his eyes with a look of sweet resignation to the girl. Nothing in the old house ever escaped his sharp eyes. The old china with its gold band, and the cut glass that had not known service for years struck him at once.

Ezra Dameron did not understand much about human nature, though like all cunning people he thought he did. It was beginning to dawn upon him that Zelda was deeper than he had imagined. Perhaps, he said to himself, she was as shrewd and keen as himself; or, he asked again, was she not playing some deep role—even laying a trap for him? He did not know that the moods of a girl are as many as the moods of the wind and sea. He remembered that his wife had been easily deceived. He had crushed the mother; but this girl would not so easily be subdued. The candles made a soft light upon the table. He lifted his eyes furtively to see whether the gas in the chandelier overhead was lighted; and was relieved to note that the extravagance of the candles was not augmented there. He drew his bony fingers across the table-cloth, feeling its texture critically. He knew that it had been taken from a forbidden shelf of the linen closet. Clearly his rule over the ancient Polly was at an end.

When they returned to the living-room he tended the fire; and when he took up his paper nervously, from habit, he put it down again, and began to talk. Almost for the first time since Zelda's return, he showed an interest in her foreign experiences, and led her to speak of them. And she exerted herself to be entertaining. He had supposed that Mrs. Forrest would

prejudice Zelda against him during the years in which she had kept the girl away; but his daily scrutiny had discovered no trace of disrespect or contempt in her attitude toward him.

It had been on her tongue several times to ask him boldly about the debt of Olive's mother, even if it should be necessary to confess that she had overheard his conversation with Mrs. Merriam; but this might cause an unpleasant scene. No great haste was necessary, she judged; and so she waited. She could probably persuade her aunt or uncle to help her in the matter when the time came, if no other way should occur to her.

When she went at last to her room, the old cedars outside her windows were moaning softly. She found a satisfaction in bolting her door, and then she drew from her writing-table the little book, tied with its faded ribbon, and opened it to the charge her mother had written—those last pitiful words—and read them over and over again, until they seemed to be audible whispers in the room:

"Perhaps I was unjust to him; it may have been my fault; but if she can respect or love him I wish it to be so."

She lay awake staring into the dark for half the night, with tearless eyes, one hand clasping the little book under her pillow.

CHAPTER XI.

Zelda saw much of Morris during the winter. He went often to the old house in Merriam street in spite of the fact that she did not interest him more than other girls. She continued to delight in plaguing him, particularly before her uncle, who learned, however, not to praise Morris to Zelda. Mrs. Forrest pretended to be a diligent chaperon, but Mariona social affairs did not amuse her, and she went out very little. Frequently Merriam took Zelda to the theater; now and then he convined with Morris to the end that Olive should be asked, and the four would go afterward for a supper at Merriam's house. Zelda brought Olive more and more into touch with her own life. She knew no happier day than Christmas, when Mrs. Forrest—not, however, without urging—gave a family dinner to which Ezra Dameron, Olive and her mother sat down at the same board, with Rodney presiding. There were times when Zelda's courage failed—when the shadow of her mother's unhappiness fell darkly upon her; but she made no sign to the world. So the winter passed, and in the first bright winter days she went forth with Zan to find the spring.

"I have not heard you speak of your aunt and uncle of late," said Ezra Dameron to Zelda one day, after she had been for an outing with Olive.

"I saw Aunt Julia this afternoon. She isn't well; she suffers a great deal. She has asked me to go away with her again—she likes going about, and she has planned to visit a number of summer places."

"If you don't go, what will she do?" and the old man looked at Zelda with a gleam of humor in his small gray eyes.

"Well, I have asked her to come to the farm."

"I am very glad you did. It would be a capital arrangement."

"But she won't come. She does not like that sort of thing. She likes to be where there's something doing."

"Yes, yes; a worldly woman; a very worldly woman"—and Dameron wagged his head as he buttered his roll. He was silent for several minutes, and when he spoke it was in a tone of kindness.

"And so you are coming with me, Zelda? I had hoped you would. I have wished it so much that I have not pressed you to commit yourself. I knew that your aunt would be likely to offer something more attractive than a summer at The Beeches."

"Yes, father; of course I shall go with you. I have never had any other intention."

"You are very good to me, Zee. I am grateful to you for many things. An old man is very poor company for a young girl. I had feared that you might not be satisfied here. Your uncle and aunt have never treated me fairly. We have nothing in common. I am glad to find that they have not estranged you and me; the paternal relation is a very beautiful one; very beautiful."

Her father had spoken often during the winter of the farm. Zelda's willingness to go there was a great relief to him; and when she suggested that she should like to ask Olive to spend the whole of her vacation with them he made no objection. He knew that she saw Olive frequently; Zee had asked her cousin to the house for meals several times since the Dramatic Club episode, and her father had treated Olive with his usual formal courtesy. The main thing with Ezra Dameron was to keep Zelda away from her aunt and uncle; and it flattered his vanity that she remained with him so steadfastly and took apparently so filial an interest in his happiness and comfort. Zelda went to Olive at once with her invitation.

"I'd be delighted, of course, Zee; but you mustn't make it hard for me to refuse. This is my busy summer; we have to move!"

"Oh!" said Zelda.

"We're mortgaged; that's the trouble with us; we're not only mortgaged, but we can't pay! So we hope to find another house somewhere and get out of the way."

(To be continued.)

Not the Style.
"There!" said her husband, "that looks like a hat!"
"It will never do in the world!"
"Why not?"
"The hats that are in fashion now don't look like hats."—Houston Post.

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