

Zelda Dameron

By
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

He decided to go direct to Dameron and speak to him of the defect in the deed, more from curiosity as to what the old man would say than with any idea of helping the situation on his part, considered professionally or personally; but he justified himself on the score of the old relationship between Carr and Dameron. Carr was out of reach; Leighton did not even know his exact address at this time. And there was old Rodney Merriam, his best friend, and there was Zelda!

Dameron sat at his desk with a mass of papers before him as Leighton entered. The old man wore a serious air, to which the mass of papers contributed. A puzzled look crossed his face as he raised his eyes and regarded Leighton dreamily. Then suddenly, as though just recalling Leighton, he smiled and rose from his chair.

"My dear Mr. Leighton, this is a rare honor; I am delighted to see you, sir."

He had never greeted Leighton so cordially before.

"Pardon me, Mr. Dameron, I have come on an impertinent errand."

"I can't imagine it," said the old man, graciously.

"But I do so on the score of your old friendship with Mr. Carr. He is absent or I should have referred the subject of my errand to him. You undoubtedly have your own counsel—in Mr. Carr's absence."

"Myself! I have enjoyed Mr. Carr's advice through so many years that I feel I have a fair knowledge of the law. We have both"—and he indicated Morris by a gesture—"we have both enjoyed the instruction of an excellent preceptor," and he bowed over his hands. "Well, sir!"

"I have just happened to learn of a deed given by you to the Patoka Land and Improvement Company for a block of lots lying south of town. Of course, it is a pure oversight, but you neglected to get an order of court, approving the sale. I thought I would mention it to you. It is a sale of some importance. And now I am sure you will pardon me."

Morris turned toward the door, but the old man rose and extended his hand.

"Ah," he began, with a droll air of coquetry, "we have had the same preceptor! You have a capital eye, Mr. Leighton. I quite admire it in you; and I thank you. I am aware of the provision you indicate. But I have provided for it. The judge is away from home just now and the gentlemen to whom I have sold were anxious to get title without delay. It doesn't look quite regular, I admit. My duties as trustee are nearly at an end. Only a few days more of responsibility. We will make a new deed if necessary—but the purchaser will be protected. We are all—all honorable men!"

"Very good, sir; I am sorry to have disturbed you"—and Leighton went out. Dameron's manner had been odd; the old man had frequently spoken to him at home, but usually with cold formality; but his greeting a moment before had been with exuberant cordiality. Morris had never quite made Dameron out, and he was not satisfied with an explanation that the poorest lawyer at the Mariona bar would reject instantly. And the old man had deliberately lied about the absence of the judge of the court, whom Morris had seen but a few hours before.

The bubble that Ezra Dameron had blown upon the air was near the end of its perilous voyage. His dream of corn at a dollar a bushel—a dream wrought of the faintest shadows—was dispelled. The danger of a great destruction of corn by mid-September frosts had passed. A member of the Chicago firm of brokers through whom he had been trading, had called that day, having paid a visit to Mariona merely to see what manner of man it was who had cast money upon the waters so prodigally, maintaining a fantastic dream of values at the expense of a small fortune.

Leighton's call had made Dameron uneasy. He had squandered his own property months before; and now Zelda's estate was largely dissipated; and he faced the necessity of rendering an account of his stewardship within a few hours. Leighton undoubtedly knew something of the transactions by which the real estate held by Ezra Dameron, trustee, had been sold; and if Leighton knew, then Rodney Merriam, who was at home again, would undoubtedly know at once. He must save himself; a plan had formed in his mind by which he could hide his duplicity and put off for a year—perhaps forever—the fact that the greater part of Zelda's property was gone. But first he must get into his own hands the option he had given Balcomb for the sale of the creek strip. The sale had hung fire unexpectedly; but he rejoiced that this property had been saved until the last; he firmly believed that he should ultimately bring back to the empty treasury the money he had thrown away; but while he waited he must study more minutely the conditions that created prices. In a short while, all would be well again; but he must retain his hold upon what remained of Zelda's property. Capital would be necessary for his future operations. The creek strip must be saved and held for a greater price than she option carried. He sent at once for

Balcomb, who came in looking a trifle annoyed.

"I wish you wouldn't sent for me at the busiest hour of my busiest day, Mr. Dameron. I suppose you want to know about the purchase of the creek strip. Well, we're not quite ready to close it to-day. That's a big scheme and all our money isn't paid in yet."

"Then the option—I must have back the option at once." And the old man spoke in a peremptory tone that was in marked contrast with the mildly insistent note he had of late been using.

"Not at all, sir. That is a thirty-day option and has ten days longer to run."

"To be sure; but the trust expires tomorrow; I had no right to bind the estate beyond my trusteeship. Tomorrow is my daughter's birthday. My administration of her affairs is ended. I must trouble you to give me the paper."

"Not much, I won't! We've been delayed for a few days; but you've got to carry out the deal. That was part of the consideration when we took your lots; and moreover you accepted money on the option. The trusteeship doesn't cut any ice. Of course, your daughter is morally, if not legally, bound by your acts. I can't stop any longer. Before the 10th of October we'll be ready to close, and meanwhile you'll please be good enough to remember that approval of the sale of those lots. Some of these people we're selling to may be silly enough to have the title looked into—and I don't want any nonsense about it. You remember I fixed all that with my company to please you—merely to get that option. My own hands are clean, you understand. If anything happens. Good day, Mr. Dameron."

"But wait—I can't do it; I must have that option!" began Dameron, and there was a pitiful whine in his voice; but Balcomb went out and slammed the door.

J. Arthur Balcomb had enjoyed a successful year. Things were running smoothly with him; he had no doubt in the world that he could enforce his option on the creek strip of land whenever he wished. He knew Zelda Dameron, and he was quite convinced that she was not a girl to avoid obligations incurred by her father.

CHAPTER XVIII

Morris expected Rodney Merriam to manifest wrath and indignation at the recital of Ezra Dameron's ill-doing, but the old gentleman in Seminary Square listened in silence, and at the end asked:

"Well, what are we going to do about it?"

"That's the rub—there's not much of anything that you can do. The trust is a wide-open thing. He isn't required to report to anybody and he gives no bond; but he must get the court's approval before he sells anything; and then he must reinvest the money in other realty. It is significant that he has been selling at desperate prices toward the end of his trusteeship. He must be hard up."

Merriam had never spoken of his brother-in-law to Leighton except in terms of respect, and he hesitated now.

"My sister's idea in making that will," he began, quietly, "was to deal generously with a blackguard. It was her pride. She had made a mistake."

He paused and the blood rushed to his face. He was checking his wrath with difficulty.

"He had ruined her life. We were all opposed to her marrying Ezra Dameron; but she was not a child, but a grown woman. She left her property to Zelda through him; and she wouldn't admit to the rest of us, even at the end, that she did not trust him. She doubtless thought his avarice would protect her child."

"As near as I can make out, all the property that Mr. Dameron will be able to turn over to his daughter will be the farm out here and the old homestead and the creek property. He sold the Dameron Block about two months ago. He has sold the original holdings and he has not bought any other real property with the money, as the will provided. There is, you know, no penalty for a non-performance of the obligations of the trust. His needs have undoubtedly grown quite recently, for he has been doing business with Balcomb—fooling away the property. Maybe he's insane!"

"Don't be a fool; he's sane enough; he's a thief, that's all!" declared Rodney, irascibly.

"If Miss Dameron wished to take advantage of her rights she might have this last sale set aside. I will undertake to do that."

"And a nice lot of publicity we'll get out of it, too. No, sir, we won't do that sort of business. My family has lived in this town a good many years; and some of us have been fools, and some of us have failed; but Zelda has the right key. She's pitched it pretty high; but we'll keep it at the same note, if we can. How much did he get for those lots?"

"Twenty thousand dollars; but no doubt my friend Balcomb kept a handsome commission. I'll rather enjoy settling with him."

"He's one of the jewels produced by our college, isn't he?"

"He was the bright particular star of my class. He was well fitted by na-

ture to be a clerk in a rural general store, or more likely, a hawker for a circus side-show or the advance agent for a hair tonic. His education ruined him. He has the smooth facility of the superficial mind—even showed some literary gift, and wrote the best essays in the class."

"I know the type. A short horse, soon curried."

"There's the option on that piece of ground out on the creek. It might possibly be binding on Miss Dameron after the trusteeship has been closed. Balcomb's pretty smooth, and if the old man is in straits, you can't tell what he'll do."

"Let him blow it all in, Morris. I shall be disappointed in there's a cent left. He can have the money. I want the girl."

"Balcomb is undoubtedly swindling his associates in the land company; they are quite likely to sue him. Balcomb wouldn't hesitate about throwing the blame for any irregularity on Dameron."

"Let him do it. What do we care for Dameron?"

"But I thought you wanted to avoid a scandal, for Miss Dameron's sake—for all your sakes. I want to do the best thing and the right thing. You are not anxious for publicity."

"Most certainly not."

"We've got to approach Miss Dameron, and tell her the whole matter. It is not a pleasant thing to do, but if we get her help—if that should seem the best way—"

They were deeply engrossed and did not hear the bell or the servant opening the front door.

"Uncle Rodney!"

Both men sprang to their feet. Zelda stood in the library door.

"Glad to see you, Zee," said her uncle, quietly.

She looked from one to the other and nodded to Morris.

"You don't look so awfully glad, I must say. If I've come in upon a conspiracy I'll take myself off. The gloom here is so thick you could grow mushrooms in it."

"I'm glad you happened in, Zee. There's something I wish to speak to you about. We may as well discuss it now; and if it's agreeable to you, I should like Mr. Leighton to stay. It's a legal matter that we may want him to advise us about."

"You have a serious air. I have never been breaking any laws, you two. Certainly, Mr. Leighton may stay."

"Sit down, Morris," said Merriam, deliberately.

Zelda had taken a chair in the corner away from the smoldering fire, and Marriam found the chair that he liked least, with an unformed idea that such self-immolation fitted him better for an unpleasant task. He did not begin immediately, and while he collected his thoughts Zelda watched him with amusement.

"If you knew how funny you look, Uncle Rodney, I'm sure you'd laugh. And you seem a little ultra-serious, too, Mr. Leighton. Please, uncle, don't scold me!"

"Yes, yes, to be sure," said Merriam, absent-mindedly, and Leighton and Zelda exchanged a smile. "I want to speak to you about your property. There are some things connected with your affairs that you must know."

"But father attends to everything—you'll certainly waste your talents on me. Do let us talk of something cheerful."

"You know that your property, what your mother had and wished to give to you, was left in trust. Your father is the trustee."

"Yes, I know that."

"Your father's powers have been absolute. He is not required to give an accounting to any one—except, of course, to you, when he turns over the property on your birthday—that is, tomorrow."

"Yes, I believe to-morrow is the first of October. I understand perfectly that mother wished me to know that she trusted father—as she expected me to trust him. That is all very simple."

"Everything was left to your father's discretion, but there were a few minor requirements. In case he should sell real estate, he was to get the approval of the court; and he was to buy other real estate with whatever he realized."

"That's probably important, but not amusing. I really dropped in to ask what you were going to give me for my birthday. I'm almost sorry I came."

"Your father has sold some of the real estate—"

"Of course. You escape a lot of trouble by not having real estate, so father says—taxes and all that. But once more, pardon me!"

The color was dying out of her face and she twisted her fingers nervously. Her heart was beating fiercely. It had come at last—this hour in which she must face an attack upon her father. She had known that it would come, and she knew that she should meet it. It angered her that the terms her uncle used were unfamiliar. Law and business were unknown worlds to her. She again followed her uncle's recital closely; he was speaking with a sharp precision that he had never used before in talking to her.

"Your father has sold a great deal of your property," he repeated; "and it appears that through neglect"—he hesitated—"or forgetfulness, the court's approval was not secured in at least one case. Of course, this can be corrected."

(To be continued.)

Restless Royalty.

"Before their marriage he said she should be treated like a queen."

"Well," answered Miss Cayenne, "he has kept his word after a fashion. His household is very like one of those little European monarchies."

When a girl marries in haste it's sometimes her last chance

4 Butter.

There is no place in which bread and butter can be so beneficial or so poisonous as in the nursery. The worst thing you can give a young baby, under a year old, is bread, says a writer. But later on bread becomes useful. It should never be given new to a child at any age, but stale bread or toast, or bread baked crisp in the oven, is excellent for children. They really want more crisp foods nowadays, and if this fact was taken to heart the next generation would suffer less from decayed teeth and weak digestion.

Healthy England.

We have much to learn from England in the way of hygiene. England owes her great superiority in that respect to special laws and regulations, and also to the cheapness of "necessary" foods.—Paris Hygiene.

Dry Cleaned Them.

"Why is your grandpa's face bandaged?" asks the lady next door.

"He was sleeping in his big chair," explains the little girl, "and Willie turned the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner against his whiskers."—Life.

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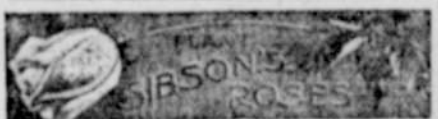
Hiccups are distinctly mortifying to the victim. As they are signs of poor digestion and may mean bad stomach trouble, if of frequent occurrence, they should be treated medicinally. For temporary cures try gradually dissolving a small lump of sugar on the tongue. Slow sipping of hot water is also good, or gargling the throat with ice water.

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