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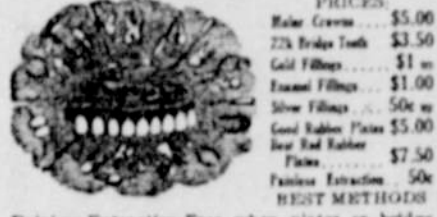
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Zelda Dameron
By
MEREDITH NICHOLSON
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CHAPTER XVIII.—(Continued.)

He waited, to study his ground a little, and he glanced at Leighton, as though to make sure that the young man had not deserted him.

"Father is a little forgetful sometimes," said Zelda. "He isn't a young man, you must remember." The sympathy with which she spoke made Merriam uncomfortable; and Leighton moved uneasily. It was not a pleasant task—that of telling a young woman that her father was a rascal.

"But while the order of court can be procured and injury to the purchaser prevented, there is another side of the matter that we must consider."

"Yes, uncle"—and she smiled a little forlornly. She knew that she should meet the blow bravely when it fell; but it hurt her now to feel her uncle's kindness.

"It hurts me—Zelda, it hurts me more than I can tell you, to have to say that all is not quite clear about this transaction. Your father has sold at an extraordinary price. I fear that he is in difficulties. In this real estate matter you have your remedy. It is of this that I wish to speak particularly. It is only right that I should protect you if I can."

"You are very kind; you are always good to me, Uncle Rodney."

"The failure to get the court's approval of the sale of the real estate makes it possible for us to save this one piece, maybe, though nearly all the rest is gone—to get it back, perhaps. The situation is not agreeable. Your father received the money and I am afraid he has made ill use of it. But we may find it possible to set this aside, or get an additional sum from the purchaser—"

Merriam was looking intently at the floor as he spoke these sentences. He was suddenly aware that Zelda had risen and crossed the room until she stood before him, with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes. He unconsciously rose and drew away from her. It seemed to Leighton that the air in the room grew tense. The girl stood between the two men, her lips parted, one hand on the back of a chair.

"Uncle Rodney, I never thought that you would—insult me—in your own house—under the pretense of kindness! I should like to know what you gentlemen mean, and what you think I am—that I should listen to such things from you! To think that I should be willing to take advantage of the law to defraud some one, on the theory that my father was defrauding me—stealing from me, I suppose you mean!"

"Zee, one moment—"

"No, sir! I shall hear no more from you. I never want to see you again—either of you!" She had spoken brokenly, and the last three words came slowly, with a kind of hiss. "But before I go, I wish to say something to you, to ease your feelings of pity for me. It was by my request—and by my order—that father sold that property; and he gave me the money—do you understand?—gave me the money for it—and I have spent it—all of it!"

She was gone so quickly that the front door clammed on her last word, as though to add to the contempt that it carried.

CHAPTER XIX.

Zelda had carried in her heart for weeks the fear of some such disclosure as that which she had just heard from her uncle. In her ignorance of business, she had not even vaguely guessed what had taken so strong a hold upon her father. He had acted strangely during the long summer, but she had attributed his vagaries to the infirmity of years.

Zelda went at once to the living-room where her father usually sat with his newspaper, but he had not come home; and she went up to her own room, glad of a respite. She had acted her part so long; she had defended him in her own heart and by her own acts; she had even sought to clothe him in her thoughts with something of the dignity, the nobility even, of honorable age; but this was now at an end. It was clear that a crisis had been reached; and while the purely business aspect of the situation did not trouble her at all, she felt that her relations with her father could never again be the same. She had been shielding him, not from the contempt of her kindred, but from her own distrust as well; and now that this was at an end, she went slowly to her room with a new feeling of isolation in her heart.

She made a light and put aside her hat and coat with the studied care that we give to little things in our perplexities. Then she unlocked the drawer of her desk in which she kept her mother's book. It opened at the page that had meant so much to her, that had been her guide and her command, and she pondered the sentences anew. When she heard her father come in, she went down in her street dress, with the little book in her pocket, slowly and with no plan formed.

He stood with his back to the flame, his hands behind him, and regarded Zelda warily, in a way that had grown habitual of late.

"Where have you been, Zee?" he asked.

"I went down to Zimmer's to look at some pictures they are showing"—

and on my way home I stopped at Uncle Rodney's."

"Ah, yes; your Uncle Rodney. I haven't seen him since he came home."

"There are some business matters that I should like to speak of to-night, Zee."

"Very well, father."

"As to your affairs, the trusteeship established by your dear mother is nearly at an end. It expires by the limitations of your mother's will on your twenty-first birthday, that is, tomorrow."

"Yes, I believe that is so."

He looked at her quickly; he found her composure disquieting. Perhaps Rodney Merriam had been giving her counsel:

"As we have just said—and I was glad to find you agreeing with me—a woman does well to let business alone. There is an immense amount of detail connected with an estate—even a comparatively small one, like your mother's. There are many accounts to keep. I have kept them for years in my own way. I am not an expert accountant, but I hope that my work is accurate. At any time that you would like to examine the books, I should be glad to aid you—"

"Thank you—yes, of course," said Zelda, hurriedly. She had been thinking of other things; but she now fixed her attention upon what her father was saying.

"I have thought, Zee, that perhaps you would like to continue this trusteeship. No one else understands the nature of the property so well as I. I have given the best years of my life to studying it. The burden is a considerable one for my years. I am nearing 70—but if you would like to have me go on, I should be willing to do so. Your dear mother gave me her entire confidence; it would please me if I could feel that your own trust in me was equally great."

"I suppose there is no hurry about it, father. It would be just as well for me to go over the whole matter at the time of the change." She spoke carelessly, but a bitterness had begun to creep into her heart. The contempt that she had smothered for a year now ceased to be a smoldering ember and leaped into flame.

"I wished to propose that myself," he replied, smiling. "And I will tell you now what I had expected to conceal until your birthday, of a little gift I am making you. I have placed two thousand dollars to your credit at the bank. It is subject to your check. It is from my own estate, of course. I should hardly make you a present of your own money."

"You are very kind; it is a handsome gift, but I think we'd better put it into the new trusteeship. Then I shall not be tempted into extravagances."

He had expected some exuberant expression of pleasure; but she had spoken coldly, and her manner troubled him. He took from the table a brown paper parcel and opened it, carefully untying the knot in the tape which fastened it.

"I think you have never seen a copy of your mother's will, Zee—unless perhaps your Uncle Rodney has shown it to you."

"No; I have never seen it," she answered.

He unfolded a copy of the last will and testament of Margaret Dameron carefully, and then refolded it lengthwise to remove the creases for greater convenience in examining it. He proceeded with an exaggerated deliberation. A man likes to mystify a woman about business matters; his own wisdom grows refulgent in the dark recesses of her ignorance.

Dameron read his wife's will through, and Zelda listened attentively, though few of the terms meant anything to her, and the numbers of lots and the names of additions, divisions and subdivisions were only rigmorola. Her father paused now and then to make some comment on an item, explaining more fully what was meant.

Either her uncle had deceived her or her father was lying; and she knew that her uncle had told the truth. The situation cleared for her slowly. His request for a continuation of the trusteeship veiled his wish to keep her affairs in his own hands, without a break. It was a clever plan and in an impersonal way she admired his audacity.

"You understand," her father continued, "that the personal property—that means stocks, bonds and so on—was to be sold and the proceeds reinvested as I saw fit. It was necessary to change most of it—I had no option in the matter. Your grandfather, Zee, had been one of the early railroad builders in this part of the country, and the original small independent lines have all been merged into great systems. It should be a matter of pride to you that your grandfather was a man so far-seeing and progressive. But now, his children and their children derive the benefit. I recall that a representative in Congress from our State was defeated for re-election back in the '40s, for voting an appropriation to aid Morse in his experiments

with the telegraph. They charged him with wasting the people's money. But times change, and men change with them!"

He sighed, and the thin leaves of his copy of the will rustled in his fingers as he sought the place where he had dropped his reading. He lingered over the words that described the nature of the trust. They were very sweet to him, because they were at once a justification of himself and a refutation of the slanders of his wife's family. He knew, too, that they gave emphasis to the suggestion that he was now making to Zelda, that she renew the trusteeship. He wished to put this as far as possible in the light of a favor to the girl.

"I am very sorry that my friend and counsel, Mr. Carr, is absent, as I should like to have him prepare the new deed of trust. He is a man of the highest probity. He is the ablest lawyer at our bar. In Mr. Carr's absence I have not thought it wise to take another attorney into our confidence. I have prepared a deed of trust myself. Shall I read the deed?"

"Yes, please," said Zelda. "I should like to hear it."

He had, as he said, copied the form of a trust deed that was well-known among local lawyers. As a trust deed it was absolutely above reproach, save only that neither the property as described nor any equivalent for the bulk of it was any longer in existence as a part of the estate of Margaret Merriam Dameron.

Zelda sat inert, listening to the recital, as her father read with deliberation and with due regard for the sonorous legal phrases. He even read through the notarial certificate; and then he drew off his glasses and settled back in his chair with a satisfied air. He hoped that Zelda would discuss some of the provisions, or ask questions, so that he might be assured that she suspected nothing.

Zelda said nothing. He rose and fumbled with the pen and ink that lay on the table by the inkstand, while he waited for her to speak. The silence grew oppressive; the girl had always responded quickly in their talk. He turned, holding the pen in his hand.

"I suggest that you look the paper over before signing, Zee."

He held the paper toward her, but she shook her head.

"Very well, I have read it to you carefully; and you can, of course, have a copy at any time. It is perfectly proper for you to sign to-night—the day before your birthday; you can acknowledge it before a notary to-morrow."

He was smiling, but he held the pen toward her with a hand that shook perceptibly. Repulsion and pity struggled for the mastery as she pondered, looking away from him into the fire. She felt that she could never meet his eyes again; but she seemed to see them in the flames, the small gray eyes that were so full of cunning and avarice. It was his deceit, his effort to play upon her credulity, that stung her now into a fierce contempt. She rose and turned toward him.

"I wish you would not lie to me, Ezra Dameron," she said, quietly, with even the suggestion of a caress upon the syllables of his name.

(To be continued.)

SIMPLE LANGUAGE THE BEST.

Two Good Examples That Should Impress Themselves Upon the Mind.

Benjamin Franklin once decided to rewrite the Bible. He got as far as the allegory of Job. He erased the passage, "Doth Job fear God for naught?" a question supposed to have been put to the Almighty by Satan. This is how Benjamin, who was bent upon making the Bible dignified, academic and scholastic, transformed that passage: "Does your Majesty imagine that Job's good conduct is the effect of personal attachment and affection?"

Improving upon the simplicity of simple English always has just that effect.

By way of contrast between this pompous foolishness and the writing of a gifted man with a sense of humor, I note that Mark Twain in "Innocence Abroad" tells how he left a room at night when he was a boy, having found a corpse upon the floor:

"I went away from there. I do not say that I went away in any sort of hurry, but I simply went—that is sufficient. I went out at the window and I carried the sash along with me. I did not leave the sash, but it was harder to take it than it was to leave it, so I took it—I was not scared, but I was considerably agitated."

Young men who are meditating a literary or journalistic career, as well as young men who think of writing for a living, will do well to study Mark Twain. Then they can pick up the thousand-legged Latin derivatives as they are needed from the writings of Burke and the speeches of college presidents and professors—Syracuse Post-Standard.

She Wondered.

The first time that Lysander John Appleton went off to work without kissing his wife good-by she wondered that he did his work well enough to hold his job. "His heart is cold," she explained to her neighbors.—Aitchison (Kan.) Globe.

Daysey Mayme.

Daysey Mayme Appleton has a heart that responds quickly to every appeal for charity. "The prizes I won at card parties," she explains, "come in handy in giving to the sickly and needy."—Aitchison (Kan.) Globe.