

**ZELDA
DAMERON**

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Zelda
Zelda

To the Memory of
My Father,
A Captain of Volunteers
In the Great War

ZELDA DAMERON

CHAPTER I

THE RETURN OF ZELDA DAMERON

“She’s like Margaret; she’s really one of us,” remarked Mrs. Forrest to her brother. “She carries herself as Margaret did in her girlhood, and she’s dark, as we all are.”

“I hope she’s escaped the Dameron traits; they’re unattractive,” said Rodney Merriam. “She’s taller than Margaret; but Margaret was bent at the last,—bent but not quite broken.”

Mrs. Forrest and Zelda Dameron, her niece, who were just home from a five years’ absence abroad, had, so to speak, stepped directly from the train into Mrs. Carr’s drawing-room. The place was full of women, old and young, and their animated talk blended in a great murmur, against which the notes of a few stringed instruments in the hall above struggled bravely.

Mrs. Carr was forcing the season a trifle—it was near the end of September—but the dean of a famous college for women had come to town unexpectedly, and it was not Mrs. Carr’s way to let heat or cold interfere with her social inclinations. Mrs. Forrest and her brother had ceased talking to watch their niece. The girl’s profile was turned to them, and the old gentleman noted the good points of her face and figure. She was talking to several other girls, and it seemed to him that they showed her a deference. Mrs. Forrest was eager for her brother’s approval, and Rodney Merriam was anxious to be pleased; for the girl was of his own blood, and there were reasons why her home-coming was of particular interest to him.

Rodney Merriam was annoyed to find that he must raise his voice to make his sister hear him, and he frowned; but there was a quaver about his lips and a gentle look in his black eyes. He was a handsome old gentleman, still erect and alert at sixty. His air of finish and repose seemed alien, and he was, indeed, a departure from the common types of the Ohio Valley. Yet Rodney Merriam was born within five minutes' walk of where he stood.

Zelda turned from her companions suddenly, followed by their laughter at something she had been describing. She crossed swiftly to her uncle with a happy exclamation:

“This is indeed an occasion! Behold my long-lost uncle!” She seized his hands eagerly. “We mustn't be introduced; but you'd never know me!”

She looked at him admiringly. Their eyes met almost at a level and the eyes were very like.

“I'm afraid that is so! And you are Zelda—our little Zee!”

“Quite that! We must be acquainted! Perhaps we shall be friends, who knows? Aunt Julia promised to arrange it,—and I'm not used to being disappointed.”

Zelda was a name that had been adopted in the Merriam family long ago, though no one knew exactly how. Now and then some one sought in the Bible for light on the significance of the name and sought in vain; but there always remained for such the consoling reflection that Zelda sounded like the Old Testament anyhow. Zelda Dameron's grandmother Merriam, for whom she was named, had always been called Zee. There had been something abrupt and inadvertent about Mrs. Merriam that the

single syllable seemed to express. A great many people had never known that old Roger Merriam's wife's name was Zelda, so generally was Zee applied to her even in her old age. And in like manner the same abbreviation was well adapted to the definition and description of her granddaughter. Margaret Dameron's child had been called Little Zee while her grandmother lived, and until her aunt had taken her away; and now, on her reappearance in Mariona, she was quite naturally spoken of as Zee Dameron, which seemed appropriate and adequate.

Her voice was unusually deep, but it was clear and sweet. She was very dark, like themselves, as Mrs. Forrest had said. There was a wistfulness in the girl's eyes that touched Rodney Merriam by the suggestion of her dead mother, the sister that had been the pride of the Merriams. Mrs. Forrest watched her brother curiously. She had speculated much about this meeting, and had planned it for her own house. But her brother had been away from town on her arrival a week before. Rodney Merriam was away from home a great deal; his comings and goings were always unexpected. He had reached Mariona at noon from a trip into Canada, and had gone to Mrs. Carr's in pursuit of his sister. Mrs. Forrest understood perfectly that her brother had come to Mrs. Carr's tea chiefly that he might casually, and without apparent interest, inspect his niece. He was a Merriam, and the Merriams did things differently, as every one in Mariona knew. Rodney Merriam was wary of entanglements with his relatives; he had broken with most of them, and he did not intend to be bored by any new ones if he could help it. He and Mrs. Forrest were, it was said in Mariona, the only Merriams who could safely be asked to the same table, or who were not likely to cause embarrassment if they met anywhere. He had not spoken to Ezra Dameron, Zelda's father, for ten years, and

the name Dameron was an offense in his nostrils; but the girl was clearly a Merriam; she was the child of his favorite sister, and he hoped it would be possible to like her.

“Yes, we shall be friends—much more than friends,” he said kindly.

“You must come and see me; Aunt Julia has graduated me, and I’m back on my native heath to stay. I shall come to see you. I used to like your house very much, Uncle Rodney. It’s a trifle austere, as I remember, but we can change all that.”

There was a subdued mirth in her that pleased him; it had been a conclusion of his later years that young girls lacked spirit and humor; they were dull and formal, and talked inanely to old people. Zelda promised better things, and he was relieved.

“Come and tell me what you have learned in distant lands,—and I’ll tell you what to forget! I’m not sure that your Aunt Julia has been a safe preceptress. And as you’re going to live in Mariona I must, as the saying is, ‘put you on’.”

“That isn’t right. You should say, ‘put you next,’—a young American told me so in Paris.”

“Maybe my slang isn’t up to date. I’ll accept the Paris amendment. Was the young man handsome?”

“Not very. He was introducing threshing machines into France. Can you imagine Millet doing an American thresher with cowed peasants grouped about it? How perfectly impossible it would be, *mon oncle!*”

Teas in Mariona were essentially feminine, but a few young men had appeared, and one of them now came toward the trio.

“Here’s Morris Leighton; I want you to know him, Zee,” said Rodney Merriam.

Merriam greeted the young man cordially, and said as he introduced him:

“Mr. Leighton’s getting to be an old citizen, Julia. It isn’t his fault if you don’t know him.”

“I don’t know any one any more,” said Mrs. Forrest, plaintively. “I’ve been away so much. But I’m going to stay at home now. They say the malaria isn’t troublesome in Indiana any more.”

“Not half as bad as in your chosen Italy,” her brother answered.

“And it doesn’t seem new here at all,—the buildings down-town really look old,” said Zelda.

“The town’s old enough; it’s ancient; it’s older even than I am!”

“He’s very young to be an uncle,” declared Leighton. “He’s really the youngest man we have. If you’re the long-exiled niece, I must confess my amazement, Miss Dameron. I had the impression that you weren’t grown up.”

“That wasn’t fair, Uncle Rodney. You ought to have prepared the way for me better than that.”

“You’ll do very well for yourself. I’ll walk down with you when you go, Morris.”

Merriam moved away through the crowd, followed by his sister, who wished to get him aside to question him. She had planned that her brother should now share her responsibility; she saw that he liked the girl; but this would not serve unless she caught him with his guard still down and compelled him to admit it.

“You know Uncle Rodney very well, don’t you?” said Zelda to Leighton. “It must be very well, because I’ve already heard that; so I may grow jealous. I’d forgotten he was so splendid. He was always my hero, though. When I was a little girl I used to sit on a trunk in his garret and watch him fence with a German fencing master. It was great fun. Uncle Rodney was much better than the master, and I applauded all his good points.”

“The applause was certainly worth working for. I sometimes fence with Mr. Merriam myself. I assure you that his hand and eye have not lost their cunning. But we lack spectators!”

“I’m too big for the trunk now, so you’ll have to get along. Is that all you do,—play at fighting?”

“No; when my adversary gets tired, he talks to me.”

“Oh! he’s tired, then, before the conversation begins. Perhaps it’s safer—that way!”

She hesitated before speaking the last words of her sentences with an effect that was amusing.

“I’m a pretty bad fencer; I wasn’t prepared for that.”

“It’s wise always to be on guard. They teach that, I think, in the schools.”

“I wish you’d tell me something to say to the guest of honor. Is she a Protestant deaconess, a temperance reformer, an educator, or what? I have to say something to her before I go.”

“Quite between ourselves, I don’t know what she is,” said Zelda, “and I don’t care; but if my judgment is worth anything, her things—clothes—the *tout ensemble*—are charming. You might tell her we like her raiment and ask for a card to her tailor. There are some old ladies over there that I remember dimly,—I must go and speak to them. Please say a good word to Uncle Rodney about me, if you can—conscientiously.”

She left him with a quick little nod and slipped away into the crowd.

Morris Leighton’s social adventures had not lacked variety, as a young western American’s experiences may go. He knew a good deal about girls, or thought he did; and while a young man is still under thirty the delusion serves all the purposes of actual knowledge. Rodney Merriam had often spoken to Leighton of Zelda Dameron’s home-coming, but with his habitual reserve in referring to family matters. There was, of course, no reason why he should have made any point of discussing his niece with a young man who had never seen her. The Merriams were not like the usual run of simple, wholesome, bread-and-butter folk who gave the social and intellectual note to Mariona; and Morris, in his slight knowledge of all of them except Rodney, doubtless thought them much more unusual than they were.

His eyes followed Zelda, and in a moment he caught a glimpse of her profile. He had been wondering of whom she reminded him; and as he joined a group of young women who were stranded in a

corner, he suddenly remembered. There flashed before him, vividly, a portrait that hung in Rodney Merriam's house in Seminary Square. It was natural to attribute all manner of romance to Rodney Merriam; and Leighton had accepted the local tradition of an unfortunate early love affair which had, as many people held, affected the whole current of Merriam's life. But the mystery that Morris had constructed from the quaint old portrait of the dark lady with gentle eyes was now dispelled. The dark lady was clearly Rodney Merriam's sister, and the mother of Zelda Dameron. The talk of the young women did not interest Morris, and he kept glancing about in search of Zelda. He could not find her, and this vexed him so that he gave the wrong reply to a question one of the young women put to him; and they laughed at him disconcertingly.

Zelda Dameron's return to Mariona was more of an event than she herself understood. The Merriams were an interesting family; they were, indeed, one of the first families. There were Merriams about whom people laughed cynically; but Mrs. Forrest did not belong to this faction, nor did Rodney Merriam, of whom most people stood in awe. There had been much speculation, in advance of Zelda's coming, as to her probable course when she should return to Mariona with her aunt. Many had predicted that she would not go to live with her father—that Mrs. Forrest and Rodney Merriam would save her from that; but Zelda was already domiciled in her father's house. The word had gone forth that she was very foreign. Many who spoke to her this afternoon merely to test for themselves the truth of this report decided that her clothes, at least, had the accent of Paris.

Mrs. Forrest led her brother to an alcove of Mrs. Carr's library, and sent him to bring a cup of tea to her there. She was afraid to wait for a better opportunity; she must take advantage of his first

impression at once. He brought what was offered at the buffet in the dining-room, and gave her his serious attention.

“This isn’t quite the place I should have chosen for a reunion after three years,” he began. “Where was it I saw you last? Geneva? I believe it was. The girl is very handsome. I suppose you found your house in good order. And Zee went with you without any trouble? That’s as it should be.”

“But, Rodney, she isn’t with me! I couldn’t persuade her—”

“You mean to say that—”

“She has gone to her father; she wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Rodney Merriam’s face darkened.

“Gone to her father, has she? It’s a mistake. I’m disappointed; but it’s my fault. I didn’t know you were coming so soon, or I should have met you in New York. I wanted to make sure she had shaken him off,—that she had forgotten him, if possible.”

“Well, she hadn’t, and you couldn’t have done anything if you had met us. She had written to him all the time we were away, and he had always acknowledged her letters. I suppose there may be something in the filial instinct one reads of in books.”

“It’s possible,”—and Merriam smiled a trifle grimly. “Of course, she hasn’t decided yet. She’ll change her mind about him. A few days with Ezra Dameron will be enough.”

He was greatly annoyed. He had looked forward for a year to Zelda’s home-coming. He had planned to save her from the ignominy of contact with her father; and now he had failed completely through an absence which he could not justify in his

own conscience. There had been no very good reason why he should go to the Muskoka Lakes just at the time he had chosen, except that there was nothing else to do; and his sister had sent him no preliminary hint of her immediate return. He felt that, between them, he and Mrs. Forrest had made a sorry mess of it.

“She’s gone home. That fact is settled,” said Mrs. Forrest, glad that the worst had now been made known to him.

The music ceased, and Rodney Merriam could talk without shouting.

“Oh! I’ll fix that,” he said. “I’ll get her away from him.”

“I should be very glad to have you try,”—and Mrs. Forrest smiled slightly. Though she feared her brother’s displeasure, she nevertheless found a secret joy in his fallibility. He was not tolerant of other people’s errors, and it was gratifying to know that matters did not always run smoothly for him any more than for other human beings.

“If I were you,” she said presently, “I shouldn’t try to do anything about it. Zelda is not a child. We have no right to assume that Ezra won’t treat her well. And her father’s house is the proper place for her. We know that he’s an unpleasant person, but many of his fellow townsmen think him a paragon of virtue. Between us, we ought to manage to keep her a good deal to ourselves.”

“I don’t like it! I don’t like it at all!”

“But you’d better make the best of it. It wasn’t so easy to arrange as you think, and the situation has embarrassments either way. We don’t know her father. It’s been many a day since I set eyes on him.”

“Well, you may be right,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “Now that you’ve given her to him, I suppose I’ll have to take a hand,” said Merriam, with frank displeasure. “I’ll have to renew my acquaintance with that blackguard. I really suppose I’ll have to call on him, or I might meet him accidentally, in the street, or at the bank. I might make a study of his habits and then lie in wait. I should like to give an accidental air to the meeting, to save my self-respect as far as possible.”

There was in Merriam’s voice an even, hard tone that was not wholly pleasant; but his sister laughed.

“I suppose I might give a reconciliation dinner,” she said. “We might as well go into it deep while we are about it.”

Merriam shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t push matters too fast. I don’t remember Ezra as a good dinner man.”

He rested his arm upon a low book-case, looking down at his sister as she talked and drank her tea. It was quiet in their corner; the murmur of talk in the other rooms reached them faintly. Several times other guests came to the door and looked in on them and went away wondering, or perhaps saying to their friends that Mrs. Forrest and her brother, old Rodney Merriam, were holding a family council in the library, and that very likely it was about Zee Dameron.

“I’ve never asked you about her money,” said Mrs. Forrest. “There ought to be a good deal of it. I hope our stay abroad didn’t cut into it too much—”

“It didn’t cut into it at all. I think I told you when you went away with Zee that I should care for the expenses. I really intended

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