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The Desired Woman

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TO

VELLA AND BILLY

PART I

CHAPTER I

Inside the bank that June morning the clerks and accountants on their high stools were bent over their ponderous ledgers, although it was several minutes before the opening hour. The gray-stone building was in Atlanta's most central part on a narrow street paved with asphalt which sloped down from one of the main thoroughfares to the section occupied by the old passenger depot, the railway warehouses, and hotels of various grades. Considerable noise, despite the closed windows and doors, came in from the outside. Locomotive bells slowly swung and clanged; steam was escaping; cabs, drays, and trucks rumbled and creaked along; there was a whirl of a street-sweeping machine turning a corner and the shrill cries of newsboys selling the morning papers.

Jarvis Saunders, member of the firm of Mostyn, Saunders & Co., bankers and brokers, came in; and, hanging his straw hat up, he seated himself at his desk, which the negro porter had put in order.

"I say, Wright"—he addressed the bald, stocky, middle-aged man who, at the paying-teller's window, was sponging his fat fingers and counting and labeling packages of currency—"what is this about Mostyn feeling badly?"

"So that's got out already?" Wright replied in surprise, as he approached and leaned on the rolling top of the desk. "He cautioned

us all not to mention it. You know what a queer, sensitive sort of man he is where his health or business is concerned."

"Oh, it is not public," Saunders replied. "I happened to meet Dr. Loyd on the corner. He had just started to explain more fully when a patient stopped to speak to him, and so I didn't wait, as he said Mostyn was here."

"Yes, he's in his office now." Wright nodded toward the frosted glass door in the rear. "He was lying on the lounge when I left him just now. It is really nothing serious. The doctor says it is only due to loss of sleep and excessive mental strain, and that a few weeks' rest in some quiet place will straighten him out."

"Well, I'm glad it is not serious," Saunders said. "I have seen him break down before. He is too intense, too strenuous; whatever he does he does with every nerve in his body drawn as taut as a fiddle-string."

"It is his *outside* operations, his *private* deals," the teller went on, in a more confidential tone. "Why, it makes me nervous even to watch him. He's been keyed high for the last week. You know, I'm an early riser, and I come down before any one else to get my work up. I found him here this morning at half past seven. He was as nervous as a man about to be hanged. He couldn't sit or stand still a minute. He was waiting for a telegram from Augusta concerning Warner & Co. I remember how you advised him against that deal. Well, I guess if it had gone against him it would have ruined him."

The banker nodded. "Yes, that was foolhardy, and he seemed to me to be going into it blindfolded. He realized the danger afterward. He admitted it to me last night at the club. He said that he was sorry he had not taken my advice. He was afraid, too, that Delbridge would get on to it and laugh at him."

"Delbridge is too shrewd to tackle a risk like that," Wright returned. He glanced about the room cautiously, and then added: "I don't know as I have any right to be talking about Mostyn's affairs even to you, but I am pretty sure that he got good news. He didn't show me the telegram when it came, but I watched his face as he read it. I saw his eyes flash; he smiled at me, walked toward his office with a light step, as he always does when he's lucky, and then

he swayed sideways and keeled over in a dead faint. The porter and I picked him up, carried him to his lounge, and sprinkled water in his face. Then we sent for the doctor. He gave him a dose of something or other and told him not to do a lick of work for a month."

"Well, I'll step in and see him." Saunders rose. "I guess he won't mind. He's too big a plunger for a town of this size. He lets things get on his nerves too much. He has no philosophy of life. I wouldn't go his pace for all the money in the U. S. Treasury."

"Right you are," the teller returned, as he went back to his work.

Opening the door of his partner's office, Saunders found him seated on the lounge smoking a cigar. He was about thirty-five years of age, tall, broad-shouldered, with blue eyes, yellow mustache, and was good-looking and well built. Glancing up, he smiled significantly and nodded. There were dark rings round his eyes, and the hand holding his cigar quivered nervously.

"I suppose you heard of that silly duck fit of mine?" he smiled, the corners of his rather sensuous mouth twitching.

Saunders nodded as he sat down in the revolving-chair at the desk and slowly swung it round till he faced his partner.

"It's a wonder to me that you are able to talk about it," he said, sharply. "You've been through enough in the last ten days to kill a dozen ordinary men. You've taken too many stimulants, smoked like the woods afire, and on top of it all instead of getting natural sleep you've amused yourself at all hours of the night. You've bolted your food, and fussed and fumed over Delbridge's affairs, which, heaven knows, have nothing at all to do with your own."

"I suppose I *do* keep track of the fellow," Mostyn smiled. "People compare us constantly. We started about the same time, and it rangles to hear of his making a lucky strike just when I've had a tumble. This matter of my backing Warner when I went to Augusta they told me they had met with more bad luck, and if I didn't advance fresh funds they would have to go under. It was the biggest risk I ever took, but I took it. I raised the money on my street-railway bonds. For a day or so afterward I was hopeful, but they quit writing and wouldn't answer my wires. My lawyer in Augusta wrote me that they were all three on the verge of suicide, and if they could

not close a certain deal in Boston they would go under. That's what I've been waiting on for the last week, and that's why I've been crazy. But it is all right now — all right. I'm safe, and I made money, too—money that Delbridge would like to have."

"There are no two ways about it." Saunders reached for a cigar in a tray on the desk and cut off the tip with a paper-knife. "You've got to take a rest and get your mind off of business."

"Nobody knows that better than I do," Mostyn said, a sickly smile playing over his wan face, "and I'm in the mood for it. I feel as a man feels who has just escaped the gallows. I'm going to the mountains, and I don't intend to open a business letter or think once of this hot hole in a wall for a month. I'm going to fish and hunt and lie in the shade and swap yarns with mossback moonshiners. I've just been thinking of it, and it's like a soothing dream of peace and quiet. You know old Tom Drake's place near your farm? I boarded there two weeks three years ago and loved every cat and dog about. Tom told me to come any time I felt like it."

"No better place anywhere," Saunders said. "I shall run up home now and then, and can see you and report, but you needn't bother about us; we'll keep this thing afloat. I'm wondering how you are going to get away from your social duties. They usually claim you at this time of the year. Old Mitchell and his daughter will certainly miss you."

Mostyn stared at his friend steadily. "They are off for Atlantic City Monday. They hinted at my joining them, but I declined. I was worried at the time over this deal, but I need something quieter than that sort of trip. You are always coupling my name with Miss Irene's. I'm not the favorite in that quarter that you make me out."

"I have eyes and ears and *some* experience in human nature." Saunders puffed at his cigar. He felt that his friend was expecting what he was saying. "Mitchell is getting in his dotage, and he talks very freely to me at times."

"Surely not about—about me and Irene?" Mostyn said, a ripple of interest in his tone.

"Oh yes, he quite lets himself go now and then. He thinks the sun rises and sets in you. He is constantly talking about your rapid rise and keen business judgment."

"You can't mean that he's ever gone so—so far as actually to speak of me in—in connection with his daughter?" Mostyn said, tentatively.

"I may as well tell you that he has." Saunders felt that the subject was a delicate one. "At least, he has expressed the hope that you and she would care for each other. He knew your father and liked him, and he has been afraid that Miss Irene might fancy some young fellow with no sort of chance in the world. He speaks quite freely of her as his sole heiress, often showing me the actual figures of what he expects to leave her."

A touch of red appeared in Mostyn's cheeks. "He is getting old and garrulous," he said. "I really have been of some help to him. It happens that I've never advised him wrongly in any venture he has made, and I suppose he overrates my ability; but, really, I give you my word that I have not thought seriously of marrying *any one*. I suppose some men would call me a fool—a cold-blooded fellow like Delbridge would, I am sure, but I've always had a dream of running across my ideal somewhere and of marrying solely for the sake of old-fashioned love itself."

"What man hasn't?" Saunders responded, thoughtfully. "After all, very few men, at least here in the South, marry for convenience or financial advancement. There is Stillman; he married a typewriter in his office, a beautiful character, and they are as happy as a pair of doves. Then you remember Ab Thornton and Sam Thorpe. Both of them could have tied up to money, I suppose, but somehow they didn't. After all, it is the best test of a man."

"Yes, that certainly is true," Mostyn said, "the ideal is the thing. I really believe I have two distinct sides to me—the romantic and the practical. So you needn't count on—on what you were speaking of just now. I think the young lady is somewhat like myself. At times she seems to have dreams, and I am not the Prince Charming that rides through them."

At his own desk a few minutes later Saunders sat wrapped in thought. "He doesn't really love her," he mused, "and she doesn't love him, but they will marry. His eyes kindled when I mentioned her money. He may think he can stand out against it, but he can't. In his better moments he leans toward the higher thing, but the current of greed has caught him and will sweep him along."

At this juncture Saunders's attention was drawn to the paying-teller's window.

"I tell you you can't see him this morning." Wright was speaking firmly to an elderly man who stood clinging desperately to the wire grating. "He's not well and is lying down."

"So he's lying down, is he?" was the snarling response. "He's lying down while I have to walk the streets without a cent through his rascality. You tell him I'm going to see him if I have to wait here all day."

"Who is it?" Saunders asked, being unable to recognize the speaker from his position.

Wright turned to him. "It's old Jeff Henderson," he said, "still harping on the same old string. He's blocking up the window. A thing like that ought not to be allowed. If I was the president of this bank, and a man like that dared to—"

"Let him in at the side door, and send him to me," Saunders ordered, in a gentle tone. "I'll see him."

A moment later the man entered, and shuffled in a slipshod way up to Saunders's desk. He was about seventy years of age, wore a threadbare frock coat, baggy trousers, disreputable shoes, and a battered silk hat of ancient, bell-shaped pattern. He was smooth-shaven, quite pale, and had scant gray hair which in greasy, rope-like strands touched his shoulders. He was nervously chewing a cheap, unlighted cigar, and flakes of damp tobacco clung to his shirt-front.

"You were inquiring for Mostyn," Saunders said, quietly. "He is not at work this morning, Mr. Henderson. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I don't know whether you can or not," the old man said, as he sank into a chair and leaned forward on his walking-cane. "I don't know whether *anybody* can or not. I don't believe there is any law or justice anywhere. You and him are partners, but I don't believe you know him clean to the bottom as well as I do. You wouldn't be in business with him if you did, for you are a straight man—a body can tell that by your eye and voice—and I've never heard of any shady, wildcat scheme that you ever dabbled in."

"We are getting away from the other matter," Saunders reminded him, softly. "You came to see Mostyn."

"I came to give him a piece of my mind, young man—that's what I'm here for. He dodges me. Say, do you know how he got his start—the money he put in this bank? Well, *I* can tell you, and I'll bet he never did. He started the Holly Creek Cotton Mills. It was his idea. I thought he was honest and straight. He was going round trying to interest capital. I never had a head for business. The war left me flat on my back with all the family niggers free, but a chunk of money came to my children—fifty thousand dollars. It stood in their name, but I got their legal consent to handle it. Mostyn knew I had it and was constantly ding-donging at me about his mill idea. Well, I went in—I risked the whole amount. He was made president although he didn't hold ten thousand dollars' worth of stock. Then I reckon you know what happened. He run the thing plumb in the ground, claimed to be losing money—said labor was too high; claimed that the wrong sort of machinery had been put in. It went from bad to worse for twelve months, then it shut down. The operatives moved away, and it was sold under the hammer. Who bought it in—my God, who do you reckon bid it in for twenty-five cents on the dollar? Why, the same smooth young duck that is taking a nap in his fine private quarters back there now. Then what did he do? Why, all at once he found that the machinery *was* all right and labor *could* be had. Out of his own pocket with money he had made in some underhand deal or other he added on a wing, filled it with spindles and looms, built more cottages, and three years later the stock had hopped up to two for one, and little to be had at that. He next started this bank, and here I sit in it"—the old man swept the interior with a slow glance—"without a dollar to my name and my

daughters hiring out for barely enough to keep rags on their bodies. Say, what do you think — "

"I am afraid the courts are the only place to settle a matter upon which two parties disagree," Saunders said, diplomatically, though a frown of sympathy lay on his handsome dark face.

"The courts be damned!" the old man growled, pounding the floor with his stick. "I *did* take it to law. I spent the twelve thousand and odd dollars that I rescued from the ruin in suing him, only to discover that the law itself favors the shyster who has money and is sharp enough to circumvent it."

"I am sorry, but there is absolutely nothing I can do to help you, Mr. Henderson," Saunders said, lamely. "Of course, I mean in regard to this particular matter. If you are in want, however, and any reasonable amount would be of service to you—why, on my own account I am willing — "

"I don't mean that," the old man broke in, tremulously. "You are very kind. I know you would help me, you show it in your face; but I don't want that sort of thing. It is—is my rights I'm after. I—I can't face my children after the way I acted. I simply trusted Mostyn with my all—my life's blood—don't you see? I remember when I was hesitating, and a neighbor had hinted that Mostyn was too high a flyer—going with fast women and the like—to be quite safe—I remember, I say, that the commandment 'Judge not that ye be not judged' came in my head, and I refused to listen to a word against him. But you see how it ended."

"I wish I could help you," Saunders said again, "but I don't see what I can do."

"I don't either." The old man sighed heavily as he got up. "Everybody tells me I am a fool to cry over spilt milk when even the law won't back me; but I'm getting close to the end, and somehow I can't put my mind on anything else." He laid his disengaged hand on Saunders's shoulder almost with the touch of a parent. "I'll say one thing more, and then I'm gone. You've done me good this morning—that is, *some*. I don't feel quite so—so hurt inside. It's because you offered to—to trust me. I won't forget that soon, Saunders, and

I'm not going to come in here any more. If I have to see him I will meet him somewhere else. Good-by."

Saunders watched the bent form shamble between the counters and desks and disappear.

"Poor old chap!" he said. "The shame of his lack of judgment is killing him."

Just then the door of Mostyn's office opened, and Mostyn himself came out. He paused over an electric adding-machine which was being manipulated by a clerk, gave it an idle glance, and then came on to his partner.

"Albert says old Henderson was here talking to you," he said, coldly.

"I suppose it's the old complaint?"

"Yes," Saunders nodded, as he looked up. "I did what I could to pacify him; he is getting into a bad mental shape."

"He seems to be growing worse and worse." Mostyn went on, irritably. "I heard he had actually threatened my life. I don't want to take steps to restrain him, but I'll have to if he keeps it up. I can't afford to have him slandering me on every street-corner as he is doing. Every business man knows I was not to blame in that deal. The courts settled that for good and all."

Saunders made no comment. He fumbled a glass paper-weight with one hand and tugged at his brown mustache with the fingers of the other. Mostyn stared into his calm eyes impatiently.

"What do you think I ought to do?" he finally asked.

"I am in no position to say," Saunders answered, awkwardly. "It is a matter for you to decide. His condition is really pitiful. His family seem to be in actual need. Girls brought up as his daughters were brought up don't seem to know exactly how to make a living."

"Well, I can't pay money back to him," Mostyn said, angrily. "I'd make an ass of myself, and admit my indebtedness to many others who happened to lose in that mill. His suit against me cost me several thousand dollars, and he has injured me in all sorts of ways

with his slanderous tongue. He'll have to let up. I won't stand it any longer."

Therewith Mostyn turned and went back to his office. Closing the door behind him, he started to throw himself on the lounge, but instead sat down at his desk, took up a pen and drew some paper to him. "I'll write Tom Drake and ask him if he has room for me," he said. "Up there in the mountains I'll throw the whole thing off and take a good rest."

CHAPTER II

J. Cuyler Mitchell got out of his landau in the *porte cochere* of his stately residence on Peachtree Street, and, aided by his gold-headed ebony cane, ascended the steps of the wide veranda, where he stood fanning his face with his Panama hat. Larkin, the negro driver, glanced over his shoulder after him.

"Anything mo', Marse John?" he inquired.

"No, I'm through with the horses for to-day," the old man returned. "Put them up, and rub them down well."

As the landau moved along the curving drive to the stables in the rear Mitchell sauntered around to the shaded part of the veranda and went in at the front door. He was tall, seventy-five years of age, slender and erect, had iron-gray hair and a mustache and pointed goatee of the same shade. He was hanging his hat on the carved mahogany rack in the hall when Jincy, a young colored maid, came from the main drawing-room on the right. She had a feather duster in her hand and wore a turban-like head-cloth, a neat black dress, and a clean white apron.

"Where is Irene?" he inquired.

The maid was about to answer when a response came from above.

"Here I am, father," cried Miss Mitchell. "Can't you come up here? I've been washing my hair; I've left it loose to dry. There is more breeze up here."

"If you want to see me you'll trot down here," the old gentleman said, crustily. "I put myself out to make that trip down-town for you, and I'll be hanged if I climb those steps again till bed-time."

"Well, I'll be down in a minute," his daughter replied. "I know you have no *very* bad news, or you would have been more excited. You see, I know you."

Mitchell grunted, dropped his stick into an umbrella-holder, and turned into the library, where he again encountered the maid, now vigorously dusting a bookcase.

"Leave it, leave it!" he grumbled. "I don't want to be breathing that stuff into my lungs on a day like this. There is enough dust in the streets without having actually to eat it at home."

With a sly look and a low impulsive titter of amusement the yellow girl restored a vase to its place and turned into the study adjoining.

"Get out of there, too!" Mitchell ordered. "I want to read my paper, and you make me nervous with your swishing and knocking about."

"I can slide the doors to," Jincy suggested, as she stood hesitatingly in the wide opening.

"And cut off all the air!" was the tart response. "From now on I want you to pick times for this sort of work when I'm out of the house. My life is one eternal jumping about to accommodate you. I want comfort, and I'm going to have it."

Shrugging her shoulders, the maid left the room. Mitchell had seated himself near an open window and taken up his paper when his daughter came down the steps and entered. She was above medium height, had abundant chestnut hair, blue eyes, a good figure, and regular features, the best of which was a sweet, thin-lipped, sensitive mouth. She had on a blue kimono and dainty slippers, and moved with luxurious ease and grace.

"You ought to have more patience with the servants, father," she said, testily. "Jincy is slow enough, heaven knows, without you giving her excuses for being behind with her work. Now she will go to the kitchen and hinder the cook. If you only knew how much trouble servants are to manage you'd be more tactful. Half a dozen women in this town want that girl, and she knows it. Mrs. Ander-

son wants to take her to New York to nurse her baby, and she would propose it if she wasn't afraid I'd be angry."

Mitchell shook out his paper impatiently and scanned the headlines over his nose-glasses. "You don't seem very much interested in my trip downtown, I must say."

"Well, perhaps I would be," she smiled, "but, you see, I know from your actions that he isn't much sick. If he had been you'd have mounted those steps three at a time. Do you know everybody is laughing over your interest in Dick Mostyn? Why, you are getting childish about him. I'm not so sure that he is really so wonderful as you make him out. Many persons think Alan Delbridge is a better business man, and as for his being a saint—oh my!"

"I don't care what they think," Mitchell retorted. "They don't know him as well as I do. He wouldn't be under the weather to-day if he hadn't overworked, but he is all right now. The doctor says he only needs rest, and Dick is going to the mountains for a month. As for that, I can't for the life of me see why—"

"Why, Atlantic City with us wouldn't do every bit as well," Irene laughed out impulsively. "Oh, you *are* funny!"

"Well, I don't see why," the old man said. "If you two really *do* care for each other I can't see why you really would want to be apart the best month in the year."

Irene gave her damp, fragrant hair a shake on one side and laughed as she glanced at him mischievously. "You must really not meddle with us," she said. "Three people can't run an affair like that."

Mitchell folded his paper, eyed her suspiciously for a moment, and then asked: "Is Andrew Buckton going to Atlantic City? If he is, you may as well tell me. I simply am not going to put up with that fellow's impudence. People think you care for him—do you hear me?—some people say you like him as well as he does you, and if he wasn't as poor as Job's turkey that you'd marry him."

Miss Mitchell avoided her father's eyes. She shook out her hair again, and ran her white, ringed fingers through its brown depths. "Haven't I promised you not to think of Andy in—in any serious

way?" she faltered. "His mother and sister are nice, and I don't want to offend them. You needn't keep bringing his name up." Her fine lips were twitching. "I'd not be a natural woman if I didn't appreciate his — his honest admiration."

"Honest nothing!" Mitchell blurted out. "He thinks you are going to have money, and he believes you'll be silly enough to be influenced by his puppy love to make a fool of yourself. Besides, he's in the way. He took you to a dance not long ago when Mostyn wanted to go with you. Dick told me at the bank that he was going to invite you, and then that young blockhead called for you."

Miss Mitchell had the air of one subduing interest. She forced a faint smile into the general gravity of her face. "Andy had asked me a month before," she said, "or, rather, his mother asked me for him the day the cards were sent out."

"I knew *she* had a hand in it," Mitchell retorted, in a tone of conviction. "That old woman is the most cold-blooded matchmaker in the State, and she's playing with you like a cat with a mouse. They want my money, I tell you — that's what they are after. I know how the old thing talks to you — she's always telling you her darling boy is dying of grief, and all that foolishness."

Irene avoided her father's eyes. She wound a thick wisp of her hair around her head and began to fasten it with a hairpin. He heard her sigh. Then she looked straight at him.

"You are bothering entirely too much," she half faltered, in a tone that was all but wistful. "Now, I'll make *you* a promise if — if you'll make *me* one. You are afraid Dick Mostyn and I will never come to — to an understanding, but it is all right. I know I must be sensible, and I intend to be. I'm more practical than I look. Now, here is what I am going to propose. Andy Buckton *may* be at Atlantic City with his mother, and I want you to treat them decently. If you will be nice to them I will assure you that when Dick gets back from the mountains he will propose and I will accept him."

"You talk as if you knew positively that he —"

"I understand him," the young lady said. "I know him even better than you do, with all your business dealings together. Now, that