

THE DEVIL

By FERENC MOLNAR

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(Chapter Four Continued)

"You are not jealous?" Olga asked. "If you don't want the truth—no, I am not," Herman replied, and in his zone there was the peculiar meaning which his words did not convey. "If I were not afraid of becoming ridiculous I should say warningly, 'Children, be sure to be good.'"

He paused and looked at both of them. Then he said: "Goodby."

As he turned Karl followed and escorted him through the door. Olga stood frowning, worried, ill at ease. Karl looked at her in surprise when he returned.

"What is the matter?" he asked. Olga started nervously and looked at him. She pressed her hands before her eyes and for a moment did not speak. She looked away as Karl approached her and said tenderly:

"Are you afraid? Tell me, tell me." "I don't know what is the matter with me, but just now, when my husband went away, I felt as if I had been left without a protector."

She broke off abruptly, and Karl urged her to explain.

"What do you mean? I don't understand," he said.

"Yes, you do, Karl," Olga said as she turned and faced him. "You know, I have fought against coming here for six years—ever since my marriage."

She looked away from him, around the studio, with its bizarre decorations, and shuddered.

"Ugh! This place looks like a devil's kitchen," she cried. "These strange things, terrible monsters, cold, white statues, heads without bodies, and you in their midst like a conjurer—I did not notice them while Herman was here, but now!"

Karl turned swiftly toward her.

"But now?" he asked.

Olga looked at him with an expression of terror in her eyes. The two stood thus a bay.

CHAPTER V.

LEFT to themselves in the big studio, facing each other, Karl and Olga were silent. There was a look in Karl's eyes that Olga had never seen before.

There was a tumult in her heart that she had never before felt. It was Karl who first recovered himself and tried to break the silence, trying to speak lightly.

"Don't be nervous," he said reassuringly. "This is the reception room of my studio. Every woman I paint comes here."

"And do you paint every woman who comes here?" Olga asked slowly.

"No," Karl replied shortly.

There was another awkward pause.

Olga could not tell why she had asked that question any more than Karl could have told why he had asked Herman if he was not afraid to leave them alone. It was some unsuspected jealousy that prompted it.

"Did you understand my husband?" Olga asked.

"Yes, I think I did."

"He said 'I trust you.' Why should he say that? Why should it not be a matter of course?"

"You don't think he is really jealous?"

Olga shook her head.

"I don't know," she said. "During the six years we have been together and you have been our friend he has often pretended to be jealous. This time there was something in his voice that made me believe it was more than pretense. It is the first time he has ever left us alone."

They were standing, Karl near the door, where he had bidden Herman farewell. Olga was on the opposite side of the apartment. In the alcove in one corner an open fire burned brightly, casting a red glow over the big, comfortable armchair drawn up before it, with its high, pulpit shaped back toward them. Karl walked over to Olga and said with quiet earnestness:

"We have tried to avoid it, Olga, tried for six years. Now that the situation is forced upon us, why not be honest? Let us talk about it frankly."

"I think it was sweet not to discuss it for six long years," Olga said, smiling at him. "A clean conscience is like a warm cloak, Karl. It infolds us and makes us feel so comfortable."

She tried to make her mood seem light, but Karl would not fall in with it.

"Last night when it was suggested that I should paint your portrait you gave me a look I had never seen before," he persisted. "I wonder why."

"I don't know," Olga answered, her fear returning. "Don't let us talk about it. I don't want to."

"You must not be afraid of me, Olga. If I were any one else you might be frightened. I am fond of you, yes, but respectfully. I do not see what harm can be done by talking everything over quietly. It seems so long ago—seven years—since they told me that Herman was to be your husband. It was on the anniversary of the day—"

"Oh, Karl!" she protested, holding out her hands to silence him.

"The day we kissed each other," he went on, speaking so quietly that it seemed almost a whisper. "We were almost children then. I was a poor little chap, who gave drawing lessons to Herman and his sisters. You were a little waif, fed cake and tea at the millionaire's table. There we met, a beggar boy and a beggar girl, thrown together in a palace. We looked at each other, and I think we understood."

Olga covered her burning face with her hands, and Karl went on:

"We kissed each other quite innocently—just one kiss, the memory of which has almost faded."

"Yes, Karl, faded," Olga cried eagerly. "We have grown up sensibly, and we never mentioned it."

Karl seemed not to hear her interruption. He went on:

"You became Herman's wife and went to live in a palace. I found you there when I came back from Paris, still fond of you, but determined never to tell you so, and when I met you again I, too, was somewhat changed. Still, when our eyes met, Olga, it was with the same look of the two poor, longing little beggars of the years ago. But we did not kiss again."

"Why not?" Olga breathed.

"Your husband and I are the best of friends," Karl said. "Though we have met hundreds of times, you and I, we have not mentioned it."

Olga turned to him gratefully and held out her hand to clasp his.

"You are a good, true friend, Karl."

"Are you satisfied now?" Karl asked her, smiling. "You are not afraid of me, are you?"

"No, but there was something in my husband's voice that frightened me," Olga answered. "He knows what we were to each other, and when he was leaving us here alone I think it made him feel uncomfortable. We aren't in love any more, are we, Karl?"

"No, of course not."

"And it is sweet to think that we have not entirely forgotten old times, isn't it?"

"Yes," he answered absently.

"And of course if we loved each other still you would not marry, would you, Karl?"

"Of course not," he said shortly.

"Now you will get married and you will be very, very happy. And I, too, shall be happy, because I want you to marry, and I myself have chosen a sweet, clever girl for you."

"Exactly," Karl acquiesced dryly.

"And now let us think no more of it," Olga cried, her mood changing to one of gaiety.

She ran over to the door and turned and faced Karl, knocking loudly on the panel.

"Now for work. We have done nothing," she said. "Monsieur, I have come to have my portrait painted."

"Come in, madame," Karl said, bowing gravely and entering into her play. "Good morning."

"I have come to have my portrait painted," Olga said again.

Karl forgot the playing and exclaimed seriously:

"Ah, last night I made a memory sketch of you after I got home. I have made many, very many, but now I see you differently."

"Why?" Olga asked, startled again by his vehemence.

"Yesterday I saw the lines of your figure; today I see your soul," he said.

"Yesterday you were a model; today you are an inspiration."

"Please, Karl, please, don't. We agreed to end everything," she pleaded.

"It is hard to end everything so suddenly."

"Karl, my good friend, I did wrong in coming here," Olga said. "Now that I did come, let us work. Take your colors and brush. We must get through with it as soon as possible."

"You are right, Olga, as soon as possible."

"What shall I do first?" she asked.

"Take off your hat and coat, please," Karl stepped toward her with outstretched hands as if to help her. She drew back, with a little gesture of apprehension.

"You mustn't touch me," she said. As she brushed him Karl caught a whiff of fragrance from her hair that was intoxicating.

"Do you use perfume on your hair?" he asked, quite innocently.

"Certainly not," she laughed.

"Oh, then, it is the natural perfume of your hair! Pardon me; I stood too close to you."

Olga removed her hat and cloak. She looked up and saw that Karl was regarding her intently.

"You seem to be studying my features," she said.

"I know them by heart, each one," he answered. "I am thinking of a pose. You know your husband wished a half length in evening gown."

"Yes, I should have preferred a full length in street costume."

"I agree with Herman. You must be quick. It is getting dark."

"What shall I do?"

"Your waist. You must take it off. You will find some pearls there from which to select one for your shoulders. I will go into the studio."

"Oh, Karl!"

"Don't mind. I shall close the door."

Oh, it is snowing terribly!" he added as he moved toward the big studio.

"Snowing! Oh, Karl, can't we postpone this? I don't feel well today. Tomorrow I could come and bring my maid."

"Certainly not. Your husband would surely want to know why we did no work today. Now I will leave you."

He left the room, closing the studio doors behind him. Olga looked apprehensively about her. Some mysterious presence seemed to oppress her. She fumbled with nerveless fingers at the buttons of her waist.

"Oh, what folly!" she cried to herself. "What is the matter with me?"

Resolutely she set to work and drew from her beautiful shoulders and gleaming rounded arms the silken waist that covered them. She turned to get the shawl, and the waist fell to the floor as she recoiled, with a shriek of terror, from an apparition that arose slowly from the depths of the big armchair.

Where there had been no human being an instant before Olga saw a tall, strange looking man. He was in conventional afternoon attire, save that his waistcoat was red, in sharp contrast to the somber black of his frock coat. His hair was black. His upward pointing eyebrows were black, and his eyes shone like dull burning lumps of coal. His face was like a mask, matching his immaculate linen in whiteness. It was cynical in its expression and almost sinister as he bowed low, with his hands folded over his breast, and said in a low, musical voice:

"Pardon me, madame; I think you dropped something."

He stooped and picked up the silken waist which had fallen from Olga's hands. As he held it out to her she drew back in horror.

CHAPTER VI.

OLGA shrank from this strange being, sensible of his serpentine like fascination, even while he repelled her. It flashed across her consciousness that he was something more than human, something worse—the embodiment of malevolent purpose—a man devoid of good—the devil himself.

He came from behind the chair, and as he moved toward her his every action heightened the impression she had received. In a situation where any man might have been confused he was perfectly self possessed. His attitude was neither offensive nor ingratiating. He became at once a part of her surroundings, of her thoughts—yes, of her soul. It was this influence that she felt herself combating with growing weakness.

"I hope you will forgive me," his smooth, suave voice went on, breaking the stillness almost melodiously, and he bowed again. "I permitted myself to fall asleep."

Still Olga could not find tongue, and she drew yet farther away. The man, or the devil, watched her as she groped for the shawl, found it and quickly wound its flimsy length around her beautiful shoulders and arms. An expression of cynical amusement crossed his face.

"Excuse me, but I awoke just as you were about to unbutton your blouse," he said. "Propriety should have made me close my eyes, but—"

"Oh!" Olga cried, shocked into speech.

"Oh, I know, madame," he said, with a deprecating gesture and another profound bow, "you think I am suspicious, and you only came here—"

"To have my portrait painted," Olga said quickly.

"Precisely," he acquiesced, with the same cynical expression. "Only yesterday I met a lady at the dentist's, and I observed that she permitted him to extract a perfectly good and very pretty tooth."

"But I—" Olga began, accepting the defensive position into which he placed her when he interrupted her.

"Yes, you, I know, speak the truth. I am even at liberty to believe you, but I cannot."

For an instant Olga recovered her self possession, and her indignation sprang into a flame that she should be addressed in this manner by a man whom she had never seen before—an intruder.

"I don't know why I permit a stranger to talk to me in this fashion," she exclaimed. "It amazes me."

The man stepped toward her. Terrified, she turned and fled toward the door of the studio.

"Karl! Karl!" she called.

The stranger smiled as the doors were flung open and Karl burst into the room. The young artist paused, astonished at the presence of the stranger.

He was more amazed when the man cried out in the voice of genial comradeship:

"Hello, Karl! How do you do?"

"Why, how do you do?" Karl faltered, looking blankly from Olga to the mysterious visitor. "I don't!"

"You don't remember me," the other said. "Don't you recall me at Monte Carlo?"

"Oh, yes, at Monte Carlo," Karl said, with dawning recollection.

"It was an eventful day," the stranger said.

"Yes, yes, of course I remember. It was last fall, when I had lost all my money playing roulette. Some one stood behind me, and it was you. I was afraid when I turned and saw you, because I fancied I had seen you a moment before beside the croupier grinning at me as my gold pieces were swept away. But when I had lost everything you offered me a handful of gold."

"Which you refused, but I saw the longing to accept in your eyes."

"I did not know you."

"But I offered it again and you accepted."

"Yes, and in ten minutes I had recouped my losses and won \$20,000 besides," Karl cried, with growing enthusiasm. "I remember indeed. Your money seemed to possess mystic luck. When you put it in my hands it glowed, and I thought it was hot. It seemed to burn me."

"You were excited, my boy," said the other genially. "But you repaid me and invited me to dine. I could not accept because I was forced to leave for Spain that same evening. I promised, however, to call on you when you needed me, and here I am."

He bowed to Karl and Olga, who stood in speechless astonishment at this strange dialogue. She could understand nothing of this uncanny stranger, this specter in black and white, who seemed to emit a lurid radiance, as if his red waistcoat were alive.

"It was kind of you to come," Karl said. "I am glad."

"You were not here when I entered," the visitor said, "and I took a seat in that comfortable armchair. The warmth of the fire affected me, and I permitted myself to fall asleep."

He indicated with a sweeping gesture the big pulpit backed armchair. Olga started and cried out:

"That chair was empty. I remember quite well when my husband was here. There was no one in it. I am absolutely certain."

Karl was so strangely affected by the stranger's presence that he did not notice Olga's agitation. The other regarded her with his expression of cynical amusement, bowed gravely and said:

"Then I was mistaken, madame."

"Won't you sit down?" Karl said. "Allow me to present you to—but I can't remember your name."

"It does not matter," the other said, with an expansive outward gesture of his restless, eloquent hands. "I am a philanthropist traveling incognito. You may call me anything you like; call me Dr. Millar."

"Dr. Millar," Karl repeated, seeming for the first time to have some doubt as to the character of his guest.

"Oh, you may rest assured my social position is beyond question," the stranger said, as if divining his thought.

Karl did not heed the irony of his speech, but presented him to Olga, who distantly acknowledged his bow. As Karl appeared to succumb to this strange influence she felt herself growing indignant. Millar seemed bent on provoking an outburst, and his astonishing remarks in another world have seemed vulgar insolence, but in him they possessed a singular meaning that made both Karl and Olga shiver.

"Under different circumstances I should now take my hat and say good-by," Millar said after the introduction. "But my infinite tact compels me to force my presence upon you in this most unpleasant situation."

The innuendo stung Olga, and she turned to the artist.

"Karl, I can hardly believe it," she exclaimed indignantly. "Think of it—this man dared to—"

"How long has your husband been dead?" Millar interrupted, with exasperating coolness.

"I am not a widow," Olga said, surprised that she should reply.

"Oh, you are divorced?"

"I am not."

"Then if you feel that I have affronted you I should think your husband would be the proper man to appeal to," he said, with the utmost coolness.

He seemed like a trainer prodding tame animals with sharp prongs out of the lethargy of their cages live to stir them to violence. Turning to Karl, he went on:

"However, if you wish it I am also at your disposal. But do you not see, madame, that it would be an admission on your part?"

He spoke as one who had read every secret thought of each. Bewildered, Karl cried out:

"What does all this talk mean? I don't understand anything. You come in here unannounced; I don't know how nor from where. You make us feel quite uncomfortable, just as if you had trapped us in some compromising situation."

"Yes, yes, that is it," Olga cried, relieved at Karl's outburst.

The stranger looked at him amusedly.

"You may be as impolite to me as you wish; I cannot go," he said.

"Why?" Olga demanded.

"My departure now would mean that I leave you because I have interrupted you. On the other hand, by remaining I prove that I suspect nothing."

"There is nothing to suspect," Karl declared angrily. "I do not want you here."

"Then that is settled. Let us talk of something else," the visitor remarked with the most casual inattention to Karl's rage. "The weather— isn't it snowing beautifully? Art are you preparing anything for the spring exhibition at the Royal academy?"

"Perhaps I may send something," Karl answered sullenly.

Olga's bewilderment gave place to panic. In a whirl was formed the purpose of snatching up her waist and rushing from the room. Before she could do it the stranger was there.

hitting the waist out and bowing profoundly.

"Permit me, madame," he said. With a cry of astonishment Olga snatched at the garment.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?" she cried.

With his restless, vibrant hands in the air the stranger said:

"I come from nowhere; I go everywhere; I am here."

He touched his forehead with his long white fingers, and his black eyes were fixed upon her. Clutching the silken garment she had worn, Olga rushed into the studio. Millar, man or devil, looked after her and chuckled.

CHAPTER VII.

KARL threw himself into a chair as Olga fled into the outer studio and sat there, not looking at his unwelcome visitor. Dr. Millar seemed to find his dejection amusing. He allowed the silence to remain undisturbed while he puffed a cigarette. Then he said, half to himself, half to Karl:

"Full of temperament, that woman, and pretty, too, extremely pretty."

"Yes, she is pretty," Karl acquiesced without looking at him.

"It's a pity she doesn't love her husband," was the next cynical remark that fell on Karl's ears.

He wheeled in his seat and looked at the visitor, who went on with perfect coolness:

"How do I know? It was apparent when she fancied I had insulted her and turned to you for protection."

Karl angrily slammed down an ash tray he had picked up in his nervous fingers and began to pace the floor. Millar went on in a light tone:

"She does not love her husband. He must be a genius or a very commonplace man. Marriage always is a failure with such men. Common men live so low that women are afraid of them and may steal into their lives at night through a cellar window. Genius, well, genius lives on the top floor, up toward the clouds, and with so many gloomy steps to climb, and no elevator, it's very uncomfortable for a pretty woman. Her ideal is one easy flight of stairs to comfortable living rooms on the first floor."

Karl maintained silence and continued to walk the floor. He looked at his watch and started toward the door of the reception room leading into the hall, which was locked.

"This is the second time I have seen madame's shoulders," Millar remarked.

spectable man could behave with such infernal stupidity."

Karl was about to retort when the studio door opened and Olga entered. He turned quickly toward her, and she went to him without noticing Millar.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Your husband will be here in ten minutes," Millar interposed.

Olga turned toward him and cried accusingly:

"Then you were not asleep in that chair when my husband was here. You heard him say when he would return."

"Madame is mistaken. Feminine presentment always feels the approach of the husband ten minutes ahead of time. Were it not for those ten minutes there would be fewer locked doors."

As he spoke he walked over and unlocked the door leading into the hall, then turned and looked at them calmly.

"Is this never to finish?" Olga asked.

"I tried to change the subject, but Karl would not let me," Millar answered.

"I have not spoken a word," Karl protested.

"By your actions, Karl; by the way you jumped up, impatiently, and closed your watch, rushed to the door, floor chap, he was afraid," he added to Olga.

"Afraid?" Karl exclaimed.

"Yes, afraid that your husband would come before you finished dressing. And you were right, Karl."

"Why, my dear Olga?"—Karl began impatiently, when the other interrupted him.

"Please, please, let us be logical," he urged. "Look at the situation. The husband enters suddenly. Well, here I am, back again, my darling! he announces. 'Where is the picture? I must see the picture.' There is none. Karl did not work on the picture. Your husband is worried. He does not speak, but he is irritated. He wants to speak, and the words stick in his throat. You look at each other, unhappy. Nothing has happened, but the mischief is done. What mischief? Appearances. Whatever you say makes matters worse, and a compromising situation like this is never forgotten by the husband. You go home together in silence."

"Ah, if it were like that!" Karl broke in. "But we are not alone. You are here."



"I WAS THINKING WHAT A SLENDOR COUPLE YOU TWO WOULD MAKE."

annually. Moving across steps in the air.

"What do you mean?" Karl demanded, stung to speech by jealousy.

"Ah, I saw them first in Paris, at the Louvre, fashioned of snow white marble. They were the shoulders of Venus. Am I right, Karl?"

"I don't know," the artist snapped.

"Well, you must take my word for it then," Millar said lightly. "I have seen both. And since Alcmena I have known but one sculptor who could form such wonderful shoulders."

"Who?" Karl asked, turning to him.

"Prosperity," Millar replied sententiously. "Such tender, soft, exquisite curves are possible only to women who live perfectly. Madame must be the wife of a millionaire."

Karl fell to pacing the floor again, glancing impatiently at the door through which Olga had fled.

"Is she dressing?" asked Millar slyly.

"Yes," Karl answered nervously.

"Is there a mirror in your studio?"

"Yes."

"Madame must be very respectable," Millar said in an insinuating tone.