

The Devil

By FERENC MOLNAR

Dramatized by OLIVER HERFORD
Adapted by JOSEPH O'BRIEN

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"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 Alcamenes 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 stily.

"Yes," Karl answered nervously.

"Is there a mirror in your studio?"

"Yes."

"Madame must be very respectable," Millar said in an insinuating tone. "She takes so long to dress."

"Your remarks are in very bad taste," Karl cried angrily, walking up threateningly to his visitor.

Millar stood erect, without changing his expression of ironical amusement, and said:

"Do you wish to offend me?"

"Yes," Karl snarled.

"Then you, too, must be respectable," the visitor said coolly, adding, as Karl looked at him with wonder, "In a situation like this only a very respectable man could behave with such infernal stolidity."

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 presentiment 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 consulted your watch, rushed to the door. Poor 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."

Millar shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, that is it! I am here, and with one word I could dispel the illusion," he acquiesced. "But I know myself. I am cursed with a peculiar, sinister sense of humor, and I am afraid I would not say the word; hence when the husband enters we are all silent. Then I say, 'I regret to have arrived at such an inopportune moment.' I take my hat and walk out, leaving you, madame, your husband and Karl."

He seemed to find great pleasure in the possibility of forcing the two into a position which would cause them suffering and weaken the barriers of self control they had built up around that boy and girl love that had come back so vividly to both. Had they regarded him as merely human it is certain that Karl would have kicked this cynical being out of the studio with his infernal innuendoes. But there was something supernatural about him. He dominated both the artist and the wife, and they were completely under his spell, struggle as they would to break it. Olga shrank from the cruelty of their tormentor.

"If this is a jest it is a cruel one," she cried.

"True, madame. But there is another way. If you wish it I can be quite truthful. Should your husband arrive I can tell him the portrait has not been touched and ask his pardon."

"Pardon for what?"

"For having seen your shoulders."

"This is a trap," Olga cried, turning toward Karl for protection. "What do

ter, dominating influence. Karl's will seemed equally impotent. He could not shake off the mysterious obsession. This man was more than a mere physical presence; he was a part of their very selves—the weaker, sensual impulses against which they had fought, but which now seemed gaining the mastery. The struggle went on in the soul of each as Millar's voice fell melodiously on their ears:

"The most important thing to you in life is to find your proper mate. Generations of conventional treatment will try to prevent you from doing so by pretending it is impossible. But down in your hearts, in their depths, where truth is not perverted by the veneer of convention, I know and you know that it is the simplest thing on earth. Here you are full of talent and longing; here is a woman, beautiful, passionate—"

Karl made a last struggle against the inevitable consequence of this demon's urging, drawing Olga away from him.

"I beg of you, don't!" he cried.

"When I look at you I fear. Please don't speak of it. For six years we have lived peacefully."

"Say what you will," the soft, even voice persisted. "I can read your eyes, and they are telling me. Don't believe him. He lies," he went on to Olga. "He dreams of her—your every night and you of him, and he knows it, and you know it. Ah! I understand the language of your eyes. No matter what you say, that little light in your eyes discredits you, reveals your innermost thoughts, and I read them through."

"Let me speak," Karl pleaded. "For six years we have lived quietly, in peace, good friends, nothing else. Olga has not the least interest in me, and I—I am quite, quite indifferent."

"Any one who thinks Karl capable of a base thought must be base and contemptible himself," Olga cried.

The two were almost hysterical as they stood beside each other, warding off the evil that seemed to emanate from the mysterious person who towered over them from the pulpit backed chair. Karl held Olga's right hand in his. His left hand was on her shoulder protectingly. Millar spoke quickly, leaning far down toward them:

"It is not a base thought; it is a beautiful thought, a thought shedding happiness, warmth and joy upon your otherwise miserable lives. But happiness, warmth and joy have a price that must be paid. He who loves wine too well will go to a drunkard's grave, while he is drunk with wine and angels sing to him.

"Whatever the price, his happiness is cheaply bought. The poet sings his greatest song when he is about to die and is a poor, weak human mortal to live without wine and song and women's lips. A little stump of a candle shines its brightest ere it goes out forever. It should teach you that one glow of warmth is worth all this life can give. Life has no object but to be thrown away. It must end. Let us end it well. Let our raging passions set fire to everything about us, burning, burning, burning, until we ourselves are reduced to ashes. Those who pretend otherwise are hypocrites and liars."

The two listened spellbound to this amazing sermon of sin. Karl's arm slipped down to Olga's waist. He felt himself drawing her closer to him.

"Don't be a liar," Millar urged, his eyes still burning into them; "don't be a hypocrite. Be a rascal, but be a pleasant rascal, and the world is yours. Look at me. All the world is mine, and what I have told you is the honest confession of all the world. We are baptized with water, but with fire. Love yourself, only yourself. Wear the softest garments, sip the sweetest wine, kiss the prettiest lips."

No subtler tempter ever spoke to the hearts of a man and a woman. Karl was leaning over Olga now. He saw her eyes, her lips, soft, warm, rose colored; he felt her arms as she clung to him, while over them both glared the sinister figure of Millar, the devil, triumphant, confident that his work was done.

There was a crashing ring at the doorbell that acted like an electric shock on the group. Karl and Olga came to their senses, dashed, trembling, thankful. Millar stepped down from the chair, baffled, and turned his back upon them.

"My husband!" Olga gasped.

"Mr. Moneybags," Millar sneered contemptuously.

CHAPTER IX.

OLGA and Karl quickly drew apart. Both were relieved. Olga felt as if she had stepped back from the brink of a terrible precipice over which she had almost fallen. Her face was colorless, and there were lines of agony across her brow. The two unhappy people stood staring at each other for a full minute before Heinrich entered and announced Herman.

It had been growing dark in the studio during the remarkable discourse by Millar, but so absorbed had both his listeners been in their own tremendous emotions that they had paid no heed. Now, as Herman entered his first exclamation was:

"How dark it is here! I am sorry I am late."

Heinrich turned on the lights, and the apartment was suddenly illuminated. Karl and Olga had not yet recovered their self possession, but Karl managed to indicate with a wave of his hand his strange visitor.

"Dr. Millar," he said.

Millar nodded absently and barely replied to Herman's cordial greeting. He was still enraged at the interruption he had prevented the success of his infamous plan. Herman turned quickly to Karl and Olga.

"Well, children, where is the picture? I am anxious to see it," he exclaimed.

"There is no picture," was all Karl could say. Olga, filled with apprehension at his knew not what, was silent.

"No picture?" Herman exclaimed,

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"What have you been doing all this time?"

"It has been dark for an hour," Karl explained.

"Yes, but Olga has been here two hours," Herman said, looking at his watch.

There was an instant of silence that threatened to become painfully embarrassing. Olga was about to speak when Millar unexpectedly stepped forward briskly and politely:

"My dear M. Hoffman, if I came a moment after you left, I had not seen Karl in two years." We chatted, and the time flew past. It was an extremely interesting conversation, and madame was so kind as to invite me to the ball this evening."

"You will accept, I trust," Herman said, with ready hospitality.

"Yes, thank you," Millar said. "I have come direct from Odessa, where I have had a talk with the Russian wheat magnate."

"Ah, I know. I shall lose money. The wheat crop is bad," Herman said impatiently.

"Oh, isn't that good for us?" Olga asked.

"No, dear, it is not. I am short on wheat."

"What does short on wheat mean?" Olga asked.

"It means digging a pit for others and falling into it yourself," Millar remarked cynically. "However, I went on, 'things are not so bad. I have reliable information that the later crop will be abundant.'"

"Good! I am delighted to learn this," Herman said, very much pleased with Millar, who now spoke pleasantly and ingratiatingly.

Karl had paid little attention to the colloquy between Herman and Millar. He tried to speak to Olga, but could not catch her eye. She seemed to wish to avoid him. She watched her opportunity, however, and managed to whisper to Millar:

"I want to speak to you alone."

Millar brought his slyly into instant play. Turning to Herman, he asked:

"By the way, have you seen the sketch of madame Karl made yesterday? It is atrociously bad."

"No. Where is it? I would like to see it," Herman cried eagerly.

"It is in the studio," Millar said. "You must show it to me, Karl," Herman said, walking toward the studio door with the young artist. "I am sorry you didn't start on the picture today, but I suppose it can't be helped. What in the world were you talking about all that time?"

As they went out talking Olga followed slowly. As she passed Millar he said:

"I will await you here."

Olga went with Karl and her husband. She had hardly left the room when the door from the hall opened and Mimi entered. As Millar turned toward her with his ironical bow she drew back, aghast.

"Oh, excuse me," she murmured.

"You wish to see the artist?" Millar said.

"Yes, please."

He walked over, took her by the shoulders and coolly pushed her through the door into the hall.

"Wait there, my dear," he said. "He is engaged just now."

Then he turned to meet Olga, who entered suddenly, looking suspiciously around the room.

"I thought I heard a woman's voice," she exclaimed.

"The scrubwoman. I sent her away," Millar explained.

"I wanted to speak with you alone," Olga began, turning toward him and speaking very earnestly, "in order to tell you—"

"That is not true," Millar interrupted her cynically.

"What is not true?"

"What you wanted to tell me," he said, with exasperating suavity. "You really want to talk with me because

you regret that my sermon was interrupted by Mr. Moneybags."

"No, no. I simply want to tell you the truth," she protested.

"You may want to tell the truth, but you never do. I might believe you if you told me you were not telling the truth."

"Must I think and speak as you wish?" she cried desperately.

"No, not yet. What may I do for you, madame?"

"Please do not come tonight," she implored.

Millar smiled deprecatingly. She went on rapidly, speaking in a low tone that she might not be overheard by Herman and Karl.

"I am myself again—a happy, dutiful wife. Your frivolous morals hurt me. Your words, your thoughts, your sinister influence that seems to force me against my will, frighten me. I must confess that I had become interested in your horrible sermon when, thank God, my good husband rang the bell and put an end to it. He came in at the proper moment."

"Yes, as an object lesson," Millar sneered. "I observed you closely. We three were beginning to understand one another when he came in."

"Won't you drop the subject?" Olga asked.

"Are you afraid of it?"

"No," she answered coldly, "but please don't come tonight."

Millar bowed deeply, as if granting her request, but he replied coolly:

"I shall come."

"And if my husband asks you not to come?"

"He will ask me to come."

"And if I should ask you in the presence of my husband not to come?"

"I will agree to this, madame," Millar said, looking at her, with amusement. "If you do not ask me in the presence of your husband to come tonight I will not come. Is that fair?"

"Yes. That is more than fair. It is the first really nice thing you have said," Olga said, greatly relieved.

She wanted to be rid of this terribly sinister influence, to be out of reach of the being who seemed to compel her thoughts to link her present with the past. She wished to feel again the sweet, wholesome purpose that had inspired her yesterday, to go ahead with her unselfish plans for Karl's future. Now that he had given his promise she was eager to be away, and as Karl and Herman entered she suggested to her husband that it was time to go.

"Yes. Put on your coat," Herman said, turning to talk to Millar, whom he found interesting. Karl helped Olga on with her coat, and the touch of it brought back the feeling that had surged over him when he had leaned down to kiss her a few minutes before.

"No," he said softly.

"Do not look at me like that," Olga protested.

"Why not?" Karl asked hopefully.

"Even when I don't look at you I see you just the same."

Olga covered her face and turned away from him.

"Karl, you shall not do my portrait," she said. "Come, Herman, let us go home," she called to her husband.

Herman and Millar were deep in the discussion of a subject on which the stranger seemed to me amazingly well informed. The business instincts of Olga's husband were uppermost, and he did not like to be drawn away, but he said:

"We shall continue this talk this evening then."

"No. I regret to say that I can't come. I have made my apologies to Mme. Hoffman. I had forgotten an engagement with the Russian consul for this evening."

"Ah, the Russian consul will be at our house! Olga, dear, add your entreaties to mine. Persuade M. Millar to come."

In dreadful embarrassment Olga turned to the smiling, cynical mask of a face that looked at her triumphantly. She could not refuse.

"I hope we may have the pleasure of seeing you this evening," she said and turned wearily toward the door.

"Thank you, madame," the fiend replied. "I shall be more than delighted."

Karl interrupted to say that he would not reach the home that evening before 11 o'clock. He explained that he expected an early dealer. In reality he had just recalled his promise to stop at the home of Mimi. Herman, suspecting his design, made some jesting allusion to it, which caused Olga to ask what he meant. He evaded her

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