

***NATALIE SUMNER
LINCOLN***



***THE MEREDITH
MYSTERY***

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The Meredith Mystery

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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CHAPTER I

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THE TEMPTATION

Anne Meredith looked at her mother, appalled. "Marry David Curtis!" she exclaimed. "Marry a man I have seen not more than a dozen times. Are you mad?"

"No, but your uncle is," bitterly. "God knows what has prompted this sudden philanthropy," hesitating for a word. "This sudden desire to, as he expresses it, 'square accounts' with the past by insisting that you marry David Curtis or be disinherited."

"Disinherited—?"

"Just so"—her mother's gesture was expressive. "Having brought you up as his heiress, he now demands that you carry out his wishes."

"And if I refuse—?"

"We are to leave the house at once."

Anne stared at her mother. "It is too melodramatic for belief," she said, and laughed a trifle unsteadily. "This is the twentieth century—women are not bought and paid for. I," with a proud lift of her head, "I can work."

"And starve—" Mrs. Meredith shrugged her shapely shoulders.

Anne colored hotly at her mother's tone. "There is always work to be found—honest work," she contended stubbornly.

"For trained workers," Mrs. Meredith supplemented.

"I can study stenography—typewriting," Anne persisted.

"And what are we to live on in the meantime?" with biting irony. "The savings from your allowance?"

Again the carmine dyed Anne's pale cheeks. "My allowance," she echoed. "It has kept me in clothes and a little spending money. But you, mother, you had father's life insurance—"

"My investments have not turned out well," Mrs. Meredith looked away from her daughter. "Frankly, Anne, I haven't a penny to my name."

Anne regarded her blankly. "But your bank account at Riggs'—"

"Is overdrawn!" Walking swiftly over to her desk she took a letter from one of the pigeonholes. "Here is the notification—see for yourself." She tossed the paper into Anne's lap. "If you refuse to accede to your uncle's wishes, we leave this house *beggars*."

Beggars! The word beat its meaning into Anne Meredith's brain with cruel intensity. Brought up in luxury, with every wish gratified, could it be that want stared her in the face? Her gaze wandered about the cozy boudoir, and she took in its dainty furnishings, bespeaking wealth and good taste, with clearer vision than ever before. With a swift, half unconscious movement she covered her eyes with her fingers and found the lids wet with tears.

Rising abruptly she walked over to the window and, parting the curtain, looked outside across the well-kept lawn. The giant elms on the place gained an added beauty in the moonlight. From where she stood she glimpsed the Cathedral, resembling, in the mellow glow from hidden arc lights, a fairy palace perched high upon a nearby hill, and far in the distance the twinkling lights of Washington, the

City Beautiful. It was a view of which she had never tired since coming to her ancestral home when a tiny child.

The historic mansion, set in its ten acres, from which it derived its name, had been built by a Virginia gentleman over one hundred years before. He had occupied it with lavish hospitality until his death, after which his widow, a gracious stately dame with the manner and elegance of the *veille cour*, had led Washington society for many years. The wits, beaux, and beauties of the early nineteenth century, the chief executives, as they came and went, the diplomats and American statesmen, together with every foreigner of distinction who visited the capital city had been welcomed there, and as one Washingtonian whispered to another:

“A passport viséd by St. Peter would not be more eagerly sought by some of us than admission to these dear old doors.”

The prestige which clung to beautiful Ten Acres was one of the reasons which had induced John Meredith to purchase his brother's share in it and, as his fortune grew with the years, to renovate the colonial mansion and make it one of the show places within the District of Columbia. With the exception of a wing added to increase its size, he had left the quaint rooms and corridors untouched in their old-time simplicity.

From her chair by her desk Mrs. Marshall Meredith watched her daughter in silent speculation. A woman of the world, entirely worldly, she had seen to it that Anne, her only child, had been provided with the best of education in a convent in Canada. Upon Anne's graduation a year before,

she had prevailed upon her brother-in-law, John Meredith, to give her a trip abroad before she made her debut.

John Meredith's pride in his pretty niece had intensified with her success in society, and once again Ten Acres had become the center of social life. Diplomats, high government officials, and residential society sought eagerly for invitations to the banker's lavish entertainments, and Mrs. Meredith's pet ambition—a titled son-in-law—seemed nearer attainment.

Like a bolt from the blue had come Meredith's extraordinary interest in David Curtis, a patient at Walter Reed General Hospital, his invitation for a week-end visit to Ten Acres, and now his ultimatum that his niece marry David Curtis within a week or leave his house forever.

Mrs. Meredith's outlook on life was shaken to its foundations. Her frayed nerves snapped under the continued silence and she rose as Anne turned back from the window and advanced to the center of the room. She looked very girlish in her pretty dressing gown which she had donned just before her mother sent for her to come to their boudoir, and her chestnut hair, her greatest glory, was still dressed as she had worn it that evening at dinner. Her mother switched on another electric light and under its direct rays Anne's unnatural pallor was intensified.

"It is cruel of Uncle John to force such a marriage," she declared.

"You will agree to it?" The question shot from Mrs. Meredith. Anne shook her head. "But think of the alternative —"

"There may be *but* the one alternative." Anne had some difficulty in speaking and her voice was little more than a whisper. "Suppose—suppose there was an unsurmountable obstacle—"

"An obstacle—of what kind?"

"A—a previous marriage—"

"Good God!" Mrs. Meredith stepped back and clutched a chair for support. "You don't mean—Anne—!"

"That I might be already married?" Anne's soft voice added flame to her mother's fury. Stepping forward she gazed sternly at her daughter.

"No; it is not possible," she declared. "I know every incident in your life. The good Sisters kept a strict watch, and you have never been away from my chaperonage since you left the convent. You cannot avoid your uncle's wishes with such a palpable lie." In her relief she laughed. "Anne, you frightened me, silly child."

"And what are your feelings compared to mine?" Anne raised miserable, agonized eyes and gazed straight at her mother. "Uncle John demands that I marry David Curtis, and you, mother, are playing into his hands for this most unnatural marriage—"

"Unnatural—?"

"Yes. You both wish me to marry a stranger—a blind man."

"Say, rather, a hero blinded in the late War."

"Cloak it in any language," Anne's gesture of despair was eloquent. "Oh, mother, I cannot marry him."

"Cease this folly, Anne, and pull yourself together," Mrs. Meredith's voice was low and earnest. "I have been to your

uncle this evening, and he has agreed that this marriage with David Curtis is to be a marriage of convenience only; and yet, ungrateful girl that you are, you forget all that I have dared for your sake."

Anne recoiled. "For me?" she said bitterly. "Oh, no. You love luxury, wealth, power, and by sacrificing me you can attain your desires. You wish to force me to marry this blind man—to make a mockery of the marriage vows by assuring me that the ceremony is all that is required of me. Do you think God smiles on such vows?"

Her mother stepped to her side and seized the girl's hand. It was marvelous how her long, slender fingers could compress the tender flesh. Anne uttered a cry of pain, then threw back her head and met her mother's furious glance with an amount of resolution which amazed her.

"I am more than six years old," she said quietly. "And I am subservient to your will only because you are my mother and I am not yet of age. If I must do this abominable thing, let it be done immediately."

Mrs. Meredith dropped her hand. The passion died out of her face and the smooth, handsome mask covered it as before.

"I am glad that you have recovered your senses," she said in a calmer voice. "Your uncle has retired for the night, not feeling well, but Sam Hollister is waiting in the library to learn your decision."

Anne shrank back. "Sam knows—" she gasped.

"Certainly; he has been your uncle's confidential lawyer for many years," replied Mrs. Meredith. "Sam was present

this evening when your uncle disclosed his wishes to me regarding your marriage.”

“And why was I not present also?” demanded Anne, stepping forward as her mother walked toward the hall door.

“Because John has a horror of hysterics,” she stated. “He has often told you that he never married because he dreads a tyranny of tears,” and going outside she shut the door with a firm hand.

Anne stared at the closed door for a full minute, then walked unsteadily over to the couch and threw herself face downward among the sofa pillows. Not until then did her clenched hands relax.

“Uncle John, how could you? How could you?” she gasped and her voice choked on a sob.

The grandfather clock in the big entrance hall to Ten Acres was chiming eleven when Mrs. Meredith pulled aside the portières in front of the library door and crossed its threshold. At her almost noiseless entrance a man standing with his back to the huge stone fireplace, which stretched across one end of the large room, glanced up and made a hasty step forward. With characteristic directness Mrs. Meredith answered his inquisitive look.

“Anne has consented to marry David Curtis,” she announced and stopped abruptly, her hasty speech checked by Sam Hollister’s upraised hand.

“Doctor Curtis is here,” he said, and indicated a lounging chair upon their right.

Mrs. Meredith faced David Curtis as he rose and bowed. In the brief silence she scanned him from head to foot. What she saw was a tall, well-set-up man, broad-shouldered and

with an unmistakable air of breeding. Ill health had set its mark on his face, which was pale and furrowed beyond his years, but the features were fine, the forehead broad, and the sightless eyes a deep blue under their long lashes.

The lawyer broke the pause. "Doctor Curtis has just informed me that he cannot accede to Mr. Meredith's wishes regarding a marriage with your daughter," he said. "He will tell you his reasons."

Mrs. Meredith's face paled with anger. Hollister, watching her, felt a glow of reluctant admiration as he saw her instantly regain her self-control.

"Your reasons, Doctor Curtis?" she asked suavely. "Pray keep your seat. I will sit on the sofa by Mr. Hollister."

David Curtis, with the instinct of location given to the blind, turned so as to face the sofa.

"Your daughter, madam," he began, "is a young and charming girl, with life before her. I"—he hesitated, choosing his words carefully—"I have to start life afresh, handicapped with blindness. Before the War I had gained some reputation as a surgeon, now I can no longer practice my profession. Until I learn some occupation open to the blind, I cannot support myself, much less a wife."

"But my brother-in-law proposes settling twenty-five thousand dollars a year each upon you and Anne after your marriage," she interposed swiftly. "It is—" she hesitated and glanced at Hollister. "Have you told him?"

Hollister bowed gravely. "It is to be a marriage in name only," he stated. "You can live abroad if you wish, Curtis. Meredith only stipulates that this place, Ten Acres, is to be

occupied after his death for two or three months every year by you both, and never sold."

"And Mr. Meredith's reasons for wishing this marriage to take place?" demanded Curtis. "What are they?"

Hollister shook his head. "I do not know them," he admitted. "John told me to tell both Anne and you that he would state his reasons immediately *after* the marriage ceremony. I have known John Meredith," the lawyer added, "for nearly fifteen years, and I know that he always keeps his word."

Curtis' sensitive fingers played a noiseless tattoo on the chair arm. "It is too great an injustice to Miss Meredith," he objected.

"But the alternative is far more unjust," broke in Mrs. Meredith. "My brother-in-law has announced that if this marriage does not take place, he will disinherit Anne. She has never been taught any useful profession; she is delicate in health—her lungs," her voice quivered with feeling. "If this marriage does not take place Anne will be a homeless pauper. Upon you, doctor, rests the decision."

She was clever, this woman. She instinctively seized Curtis where he was vulnerable; she appealed to his kindly heart and the human interest which was part of his profession.

The seconds ticked themselves into minutes before Curtis spoke.

"Very well, I will go through with the ceremony," he said, and Mrs. Meredith had difficulty in restraining an exclamation. Hollister read rightly the relief in her eyes and

smiled. He had no love for the handsome widow. She rose at once.

"You will not regret your decision, Doctor Curtis," she said, and turned to Hollister. "Will you tell John?"

"If he is awake, yes; if not, the news will keep until tomorrow." Hollister concealed a yawn. "Good night, Mrs. Meredith," as she walked toward the entrance. Curtis' mumbled "good night" was almost lost in her clear echo of their words as she disappeared through the portières.

"Coming upstairs, Curtis?" asked Hollister, pausing on his way out of the library. "Can I help you to your room?"

"Thanks, no. I've learned to find my way about fairly well," answered Curtis. "I'll stay down and smoke for a bit longer."

"All right, see you in the morning," and Hollister departed, after first pausing to pick up several magazines.

In spite of his statement that he was fairly familiar with his surroundings, it took Curtis some moments to locate the smoking stand and a box of matches. While lighting his cigar he was conscious of the sound of voices in the hall, which grew louder in volume and then died away. He had resumed his old seat and his cigar was drawing nicely when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Sorry to startle you," remarked the newcomer. "I am Gerald Armstrong."

"Yes, I recognize your voice," Curtis started to rise, but his companion, one of the week-end house guests at Ten Acres, pressed him back in his chair.

"I only stopped for a word." Armstrong hesitated as if in doubt. "I've just learned of—that you and Anne Meredith are

to be married."

"Yes," answered Curtis as the pause lengthened. "Yes?"

"You are going through with the ceremony?"

Curtis turned his head and looked up with sightless eyes in Armstrong's face.

"Certainly. May I ask what affair it is of yours?"

"None," hastily. "But you don't know Anne—"

"I do."

"Oh, yes, you know that she is the only daughter of Mrs. Marshall Meredith and the niece and reputed heiress of John Meredith, millionaire banker," Armstrong's usually pleasant voice was harsh and discordant. "As to the girl herself—you are marrying Anne, sight unseen."

With a bound Curtis was on his feet and Armstrong winced under the grip of his fingers about his throat.

"Stand still!" The command was issued between clenched teeth. "I won't hurt you, you fool!" Shifting his grip Curtis ran his sensitive fingers over Armstrong's face and brow. He released him with such suddenness that Armstrong, who had stood passive more from surprise than any other motive, staggered back. "Go to bed!"

Armstrong hesitated; then without further word, whirled around and sped from the library.

Curtis did not resume his seat. Instead he paced up and down the library, dexterously avoiding the furniture, for over an hour. At last, utterly exhausted, he dropped into a chair near the doorway. His brain felt on fire as he reviewed the events of the evening. He had promised to marry a girl unknown to him three days before. He would marry her "sight unseen." God! To be blind! Fate had reserved a sorry

jest for him. What could be the motive behind John Meredith's sudden friendliness for him, his invitation to spend a week at Ten Acres, and now his demand that he and Anne Meredith go through a "marriage of convenience"?

And he had weakly consented to the plan! Curtis rubbed a feverish hand across his aching forehead. Forever cut off from practicing his beloved profession, with poverty staring him in the face, handicapped by blindness, it was a sore temptation to be offered twenty-five thousand dollars a year to go through a mere ceremony. But he had steadfastly refused until Mrs. Meredith had pointed out to him that Anne would thereby lose a fortune.

Anne—his face softened at the thought of her. Could it be that she had sung her way into his heart? The evening of his arrival he had spent listening enthralled to her glorious voice. Her infectious laugh, the few times that she had addressed him, lingered in his memory.

With a sigh he arose, picked up his cane and felt his way out into the hall. He had cultivated a retentive memory and his always acute hearing had aided him in making his way about. He had grown both sure-footed and more sure of himself as his general health improved. At John Meredith's suggestion he had spent a good part of a day familiarizing himself with the architectural arrangements of the old mansion until he felt that he could find his way about without great difficulty.

Curtis was halfway up the circular staircase to the first bedroom floor when he heard the faint closing of a door, then came the sound of dragging footsteps. As Curtis approached the head of the staircase the footsteps, with

longer intervals between, dragged themselves closer to him. He had reached the top step when a soft thud broke the stillness. Curtis paused in uncertainty. He remembered that the wide hall ran the depth of the house, with bedrooms and corridors opening from it. From which side had proceeded the noise?

Slowly, cautiously, he turned to his right and moved with some speed down the hall. The next second his outflung hands saved him from falling face downward as he tripped over an inert body.

Considerably shaken, Curtis pulled himself up on his knees and bent over the man on the floor. His hand sought the latter's wrist. He could feel no pulse. Bending closer he pressed his ear against the man's chest—no heartbeat!

Curtis' hand crept upward to the man's throat and then was withdrawn with lightning speed. He touched his sticky fingers with the tip of his tongue, then sniffed at them—blood. An instant later he had located the jagged wound by sense of touch. Taking out his handkerchief he wiped his hands, then bending down ran his fingers over the man's face, feature by feature, over his mustache and carefully trimmed beard, over the scarred ear. The man before him was his host, the owner of Ten Acres, John Meredith.

With every sense alert Curtis rose slowly, his head bent in a listening attitude. The silence remained unbroken. Apparently he and John Meredith, lying dead at his feet, were alone in the hall.

CHAPTER II

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THE SCENTED HANDKERCHIEF

Fully a minute passed before David Curtis moved. Stooping down, he groped about for his cane. It had rolled a slight distance away and it took him some few seconds to find it. Possession of the cane brought a sense of security; it was something to lean on, something to use to defend himself.... He paused and listened attentively. No sound disturbed the quiet of the night. Taking out his repeater he pressed the spring—a quarter past two. He had remained downstairs in the library far later than he had realized.

How to arouse the sleeping household and tell them of the tragedy enacted at their very doors? In groping for his cane he had lost his sense of direction. He took a step forward and paused in thought. Sam Hollister! He was the man to go to, but how could he reach Hollister without running the risk of disturbing the women of the household? Suppose he rapped on the wrong door?

To be eternally in the dark! Curtis raised his hand in a gesture eloquent of despair; then with an effort pulled himself together. Falling over a dead man, and that man his host, was enough to shake the stoutest nerves of a person possessing all his faculties—but to a blind man! Curtis was conscious that the hand holding his cane was not quite steady as he felt his way down the hall in search of his bedroom. The soft chimes of the grandfather clock in the hall below brought not only a violent start on his part in

their train but an idea. The house telephone in his bedroom! John Meredith, that very afternoon, had taught him how to manipulate the mechanism of the instrument.

Quickening his pace Curtis moved down the corridor and turned a corner. If he could only be positive that he was going in the right direction and not away from his room. His outstretched hand passed from the wall to woodwork—a door. He felt about and found the knob. No string such as he had instructed the Filipino servant, detailed to valet him, to tie to his door as a means of identification in case he had to go to his room unaccompanied by a servant or friend, was hanging from it.

With an impatient ejaculation, low spoken, Curtis walked forward, taking care to step always on the heavy creepers with which the halls were carpeted. He had passed several doors when his hand, raised higher than usual, encountered an electric light fixture. The heat of the bulb proved that the light was still turned on, it also restored Curtis' sense of direction as recollection returned of having been told by Fernando, the Filipino, that an electric fixture was near his room. A second more and he again paused before a door. Cautiously his fingers moved over the polished surface of the mahogany toward the door knob and closed over a piece of dangling twine.

With a sigh of utter thankfulness Curtis pushed open the door, which was standing slightly ajar, and entered the room. The house telephone should be in a small alcove to the left of the doorway—ah, he was right—the instrument was there. What was it John Meredith had told him—his room number was No. 1; that of the suite of rooms occupied

by Mrs. Meredith and her daughter Anne, No. 2; his own bedroom call No. 3; that occupied by Gerald Armstrong, No. 4. Lucile Hull, Anne's cousin and another guest over the week-end, was No. 5—no, five was the number of Sam Hollister's bedroom in the west wing. But was it? Curtis paused in uncertainty. He did not like the idea of awakening Lucille Hull at nearly three o'clock in the morning. He was quite positive that to tell her John Meredith lay dead in the hall would send her into violent hysterics. It was no news to impart to a woman.

Suddenly Curtis' hand on the telephone instrument clenched and his body grew rigid. A sixth sense, which tells of another's presence, warned him that he was not alone. It was a large bedroom with windows opening upon a balcony which circled the old mansion, two closets, and a mirrored door which led to a dressing room beyond and a shower bath.

From the direction of the windows came a sigh, then the sound of some one rising stiffly from the floor, and a chair rasped against another piece of furniture as it was dragged forward with some force.

Moving always in darkness it had not occurred to Curtis to switch on the electric light when first entering the room. But why had not his appearance alarmed the intruder? He had made no especial effort to enter noiselessly. It must be that the room was unlighted. There was one way of solving the problem. Curtis opened his mouth, but the challenge, "Who's there?" remained unspoken, checked by the unmistakable soft swish of silken garments. The intruder was a woman.

What was a woman doing in his bedroom? His bedroom, but suppose it wasn't his bedroom? Suppose he had walked into some woman's room by mistake and *he* was the intruder? The thought made him break out in a cold perspiration. No, it could not be. It was *his* bedroom; the string tied to the door knob proved that.

A sudden movement behind him caused Curtis to turn his head and the sound of a light footfall gave warning of the woman's approach. As she passed the alcove something was tossed against Curtis' extended hand, and then she slipped out of the room. Curtis instinctively stooped and picked up the object. As he smoothed out the small square of fine linen he started, then held it up to his nose—only to remove it in haste. Chloroform was a singular scent to find on a woman's handkerchief.

The door of his bedroom had been left ajar and through the opening came a woman's voice.

"Good gracious, the hall is in darkness!" Mrs. Meredith's tones were unmistakable. "Anne, how you startled me!" in rising crescendo. "Come to bed, child; the fuse is probably burned out." A door was shut with some vigor, then silence.

Curtis slipped the handkerchief inside his coat pocket and once again turned to the house telephone. His nervous fingers spun the dial around to the fifth hole and he pressed the button. He must chance it that Hollister's call number was five. Three times he pushed the button, each with a stronger pressure, before a sleepy "hello" came over the wires.

"Hollister?" he called into the mouthpiece, keeping his voice low.

“Yes—what is it?”

“Thank the Lord!” The exclamation was fervid. He had secured help at last without creating a scene. “This is Curtis speaking. John Meredith is lying in the hall, dead.”

“What? My God!” Hollister’s shocked tones rang out loudly in the little receiver. “Are you crazy?”

“No. He’s there— I stumbled over his body. Yes—front hall. Bring matches—the lights are out.”

Curtis was standing in the doorway of his room as Hollister, in his pajamas, ran toward him down the hall, an electric torch in one hand and a bath robe in the other.

“Have you rung for the servants, Curtis?” he asked, keeping his voice lowered.

“No. I couldn’t recall their room numbers or find a bell.”

Hollister brushed by him into the bedroom, switched on the light, and, pausing only long enough to get the servants’ quarters on the house telephone and order a half-awake butler to come there at once, he bolted into the hall again.

“Where is John?” he demanded.

“Lying near the head of the staircase—” Not stopping for further words Curtis caught the lawyer’s arm and, guided by Hollister, hurried with him down the hall.

At sight of the figure on the floor Hollister stopped abruptly. Loosening Curtis’ grasp, he thrust the electric torch into his hand, then dropped on one knee and looked long and earnestly at his dead friend.

“You are sure he is beyond aid?” he stammered.

“Absolutely. He died before I reached him.”

Hollister crossed himself. “John—John!” His voice broke and covering his face with his hands he remained upon his

knees for fully a minute. When he rose his forehead was beaded with tiny drops of moisture.

“Go and hurry the servants, Curtis. Oh, I forgot—you can’t see.” It was not often that the quick-witted lawyer was shaken out of his calm. “We must get John back into his bedroom.”

“You cannot remove the body until the coroner comes,” interposed Curtis.

“But, man, the place is all blood—it’s a ghastly sight!”

“I imagine it is,” replied Curtis curtly. “The coroner must be sent for at once.”

“Very well, I’ll attend to that. You stay here and keep the servants from making a scene; we can’t alarm the women.” Hollister stopped long enough to put on his bath robe. “I’ll telephone from my room—there’s an outside extension phone there; then I’ll put on some clothes before I come back,” and he sped away.

Herman, the butler, heralded his approach with an exclamation of horror.

“Keep quiet!” Curtis’ stern tones carried command and Herman pulled himself together. “Go and see what is the matter with the electric lights in this corridor; then come back. Make as little noise as possible,” he added by way of caution and the alarmed butler nodded in understanding.

At sound of the servant’s receding footsteps Curtis dropped on one knee and ran his hand over John Meredith. A startled exclamation escaped him. He had left the body lying partly on one side as he had found it; now John Meredith was stretched at full length upon his back. Could