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The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman
from Wolvertons"

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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The eyes of both men followed the woman as she moved slowly across the stage. She dropped into a chair and waited for her cue. She did not look the traditional adventuress. She had a curiously pale, transparent skin, into which, during excited moments, the blood flushed rosily. Masses of yellow, silky hair were brushed back in simple waves from her forehead. She used little make-up or artifice of any sort. Her eyes were intensely blue. There was a lovely cleft dimple in her chin. Although well along in the thirties she retained her girlish face and figure.

Wentworth turned to Oswald with a flush of irritation. "It doesn't seem fair to make a degenerate of such a woman; she doesn't look it."

"That's where the mischief lies," answered Oswald quietly.

The rehearsal went on. Miss Paget took her cue. Both men watched her critically. Wentworth drew a long breath when the scene with "Cordelia" in the second act was over. The woman certainly could act!

"She'll do," said Enoch heartily. "Only," he added after a moment's hesitation, "how does Dorcas strike you? Is she strong enough? It doesn't seem to me as if she saw all the possibilities of 'Cordelia.'"

"Wentworth, your sister is going to surprise you. Take my word for it. She is nervous now, but—"

"It's a devil of a risk. 'Cordelia's' such a big part and Dorcas has had no training."

"She does not need training—the conventional training you have in mind."

"If she fails it puts me in a nasty light with the public—producing a play simply to exploit my sister." Enoch's tone was curt.

"She won't fail," Oswald spoke with quiet assurance. "Think over my suggestion about 'Mrs. Esterbrook's' part. It is there where 'Cordelia' leaves her—the mother knows the daughter well



"Are You Sure She Is So Bad?"

enough to realize it is good-by forever—that you want to cut out every spark of motherly feeling. Once or twice she almost pulls on the audience for sympathy. When 'Cordelia' shows her contempt for the mother and shatters her every ambition, there could not be a solitary throb of pity, remorse or love—it is not in her."

Oswald dropped the subject. Wentworth began to twist his hands nervously, a habit he had when disturbed.

The Englishman sat back in silence, watching the rehearsal intently. Merry stood leaning against a stucco pillar. In this act he did not appear, but occasionally, against the sharp commands of the stage manager, his voice rang out in brief, concise suggestions.

"What a remarkable conception Merry has of every character," whispered Oswald. Enoch did not speak. "Gilbert resents my orders—in a fashion," continued the Englishman. "I told him to act on any suggestion that Merry offered. Gilbert would not say a word if you went back and threw in an idea here and there; a stage manager expects that from the author. I should think you would do it occasionally."

"It isn't in my line," Wentworth spoke sullenly. "Every move is put into the manuscript as plain as a pike-staff."

"Yes, but—" Oswald glanced at his companion curiously, then he dropped the subject. "It strikes me Merry has changed. The night I spoke to him on the L he was like a boy with some grand secret up his sleeve. Today he takes nothing but a half-languid interest in the whole thing. He is going to give a remarkable portrayal of 'John Esterbrook,' but when he is not acting he seems to have no interest in life. What do you lay it to?"

"Don't ask me," murmured Wentworth. "He's a man of moods, I gave up trying to understand him years ago."

"Even when it came to the question of salary he didn't show any interest. He wouldn't set a figure. I don't know yet if he thinks the price I named was right. He closed with my first offer, signed the contract, then walked out."

"It's the biggest wage he ever drew."

"He'll prove himself worth every ha'penny of it."

Wentworth rose and pulled his hat from under the seat.

"Don't you want to see the rehearsal?" asked Oswald suddenly.

"No, I'm going home. I may put your suggestion into shape while it is fresh in my mind."

Enoch paused in the theater to light a cigar. A newspaper man, who was an old friend, approached, full of eager inquiry about the progress of the play. Wentworth brushed him aside quickly and strode out to the street. A moment later he felt a twinge of remorse. The man's congratulations had been heart-felt. He could not shake off the memory of a startled astonishment that came into his face at the brusque reception. He was a good fellow, there had been pleasant companionship with him in the old days. The old days seemed ages ago, further back than the gaiety of childhood.

He left Broadway, walking with quick, nervous strides until he found himself far over on the East side, wandering aimlessly through wretched streets, populated by the drift from nations. The sidewalks were thronged with children. Occasionally Enoch swore beneath his breath as he escaped tumbling over them during his hurried, headlong progress. When he turned a corner he found his way blocked by a huge safe that was being hoisted into a warehouse. He glanced at the street, it was ankle deep in slush. Suddenly the odor of hot bread was wafted to him from a little restaurant cavern below the sidewalk. He remembered he had eaten no breakfast, and it aroused a sudden sense of hunger. He ran quickly down the steps. The small dining room was remarkably clean. He sat down with a sense of satisfaction which seemed alien to such a place.

"Bring me coffee and a steak, a first-class steak done rare," he ordered. "Cook it carefully."

He was alone in the small room. It was quiet except for the shrill voices of children on the sidewalk. He had not known a moment of peace or solitude for months. All his life he had scoffed at nerves as a delusion. He wondered if he had been wrong, whether nerves might not be a stern reality. If they were, he had them. His mind went flashing over the events of the past fortnight, since the night, when, weary, harassed, and hopeless, he returned from Montreal to be met by Dorcas with the news that Merry had returned and was ready to begin rehearsals. It still exasperated him when he remembered how stubbornly she had refused details of Andrew's home-coming. All he learned was that the actor had seen Oswald and was rehearsing from morning till night.

A few days later, in the foyer of the Gotham, when he came face to face with Merry, the plan of their future intercourse was determined instantly. Wentworth had been in a mood to welcome reconciliation and friendship; Andrew was cold, courteous, and singularly unapproachable. Enoch's warmth was chilled and his pride aroused. He plunged fiercely into work, scarcely snatching time to eat or sleep. More than once Oswald had remonstrated; he could see that the man was working beyond the limit of human capacity. Work was the only thing that would whip retrospection from his mind. Drink had never been a temptation to Wentworth—it was nothing but a side issue to sociability—so he did not take to it now. He realized he was losing old friends; he had tossed one of them aside today.

The intuition which is bred by a guilty conscience began to play strange pranks with him. He felt as if Oswald had guessed his secret and was driving him into a corner by the suggestion that he remodel the play. He saw Dorcas each day grow colder and more suspicious. Merry at one glance had thrust him outside the pale of acquaintance. Within ten days "The House of Esterbrook" would have its first production.

Enoch shivered with apprehension as he thought of it. A queer thing had loomed up in his mind during the past few days. A decade ago a club friend with a fad for palmistry had insisted on reading his hand. The man prophesied a physical and moral downfall in the course of 12 years. Wentworth laughed at the idea, forgot it completely, then one night the memory of it came to him like a shot. He would have given all he possessed to return to the morning when Merry burst in upon him full of gaiety and hope. He could not go back; it was like unearthing a tangle of string when one

found no visible end where the task could be commenced.

(To Be Continued.)

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