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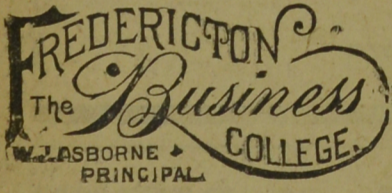
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## The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman  
from Wolverton"

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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"He told me everything," cried the girl hurriedly. She was trying to save him the full confession of his downfall. She did not wish to listen to it.

"Everything!" repeated Merry indignantly.

"Yes, everything. Oh! if you had come back only two or three days ago things would have been different."

He rose abruptly and crossed to the window.

"Miss Dorcas," he did not turn to look at her, "what was the worst thought you had of me when Enoch told you—that happened?"

The girl paused for a minute before she answered. "I thought you were—weak."

"Weak!" The man repeated the word as if trying to comprehend its meaning.

"You should not have allowed Enoch to stand as the author of your play, no matter what the circumstances were. He is not happy over it today. His nature seems to have changed. He is not easy to live with even. Oh, I wish it had never happened!"

Merry waited in silence.

"Things must come right, even if this lie has been told." She pointed at the paper which lay at her feet. "There is one way. You can play the convict so wonderfully that people must realize that you yourself created the part."

"I shall never play the convict." Merry's voice was slow and resolute.

"Oh!" cried Dorcas, "who can? Why, I thought your heart was set on the character."

"It was—once."

"I cannot understand." The man did not attempt an explanation.

"Andrew Merry," she hesitated as if searching for words which would not wrong her brother, "did Enoch do you any—any injustice?"

She waited for an answer during an infinitely long silence, so it seemed to her. Then the actor spoke abruptly.

"No. As I look back on it now, I went into it with my eyes open. I simply learned that there is no way to gauge human nature."

Again there was a silence. Dorcas was trying to understand, trying to be loyal to her brother, even while her heart, aching with unspoken sympathy, turned to Merry.

"Why don't you want to play 'John Esterbrook'?" she asked quietly.

"I don't suppose I have a decent reason, except that when I gave up the play I lost all interest in it. 'John Esterbrook' is no more to me today than 'Silas Bagg'."

"Oh!" cried the girl aghast. "How you have altered!"

"I have." Merry spoke in a hoarse whisper. He returned to his chair by the fire and bent to warm his fingers by the blaze. There was another long silence. Dorcas was the first to break it.

"Even if it were against your inclinations, would you do something to make some one very happy, some one who believes in you—who cares a great deal for you and about your future?"

Merry spoke gently. "Miss Dorcas, I'm afraid you are mistaken. There is nobody in the world to care."

She rose to her feet and, leaning on the mantel, glanced down at him with eyes from which embarrassment had suddenly fled.

"One person—cares very much. I do. I have set my heart on your success. You have a great future—won't you work for it? Besides, I am selfish." Her eyes shone with eagerness. "I want to play 'Cordelia.' Mr. Oswald has offered me the part. I have studied it. I could play it tomorrow if you would be my teacher."

Merry turned with a quick gesture as if to push temptation away from him. "Don't!" he cried. "Ah, Miss Dorcas, don't go into stage life!"

"I shall go into it sooner or later." She spoke with quiet determination. "I feel sure I can play 'Cordelia'; besides, it would be so much easier to make a beginning with Enoch and Mr. Oswald and you."

Merry rose and paced for a few minutes about the room, then turned to the window and gazed out at the deserted city. The sleet of midnight had changed to a raging storm. The wind drove the snow in sudden surges, piling it in drifts across the square.

"Miss Dorcas," he said, "come here."

The girl crossed the room. "Why," she cried, "it is a fearful night!"

"Yes. It's a fearful night for the homeless. Do you know where I might have found shelter tonight if it had not been for you? Perhaps there's a hallway somewhere that I

could have slipped into, and for an hour or two the police would have left me undisturbed. I might have found an empty bench on a ferryboat, or—the Bowery missions are open; only before one can make up his mind to seek a lodging there, they are filled to suffocation."

Dorcas shivered.

"If I had known during these weeks that anybody cared—or believed in me—perhaps I should not have gone so far down the hill. I did not dare even to hope that you thought of me again."

"Andrew," said the girl, "I care so much that I cannot tell you. Some queer strain in my nature makes me happiest when I have some one to care for. Girls at the convent used to come to me in all sorts of difficulties; the ones I loved best were the ones who needed me most. They called me 'Little Mother.'"

"Little Mother," repeated Merry; then he laughed huskily. If the girl had known men she would have seen absolute famine for love, for sympathy and human understanding in the eyes that were bent upon her.

"I take back what I said a few minutes ago, Miss Dorcas, about the stage being no place for you. Women like you are needed there."

"Thank you," she said with a happy smile. "Won't you come back? Such an opportunity is waiting for you. Besides, I could never play 'Cordelia' with anyone but you, and you must be my teacher."

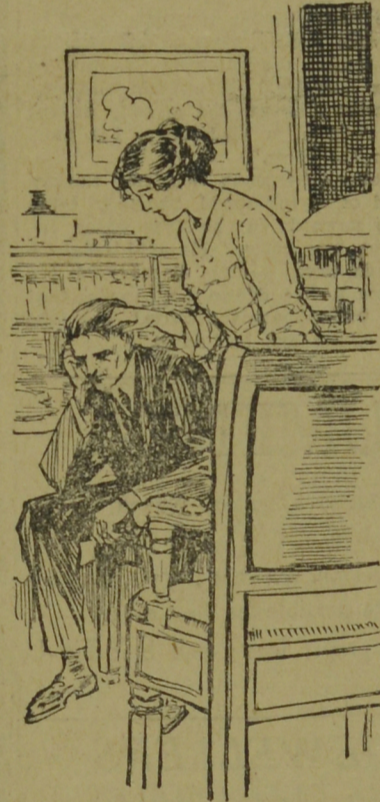
Merry did not answer immediately. Dorcas had grown accustomed to the long pauses in their conversation and waited quietly. When he looked up their eyes met—his pleaded with her during one speechless moment for all his shortcomings, for shirked responsibilities and failures.

"Miss Dorcas," he said, "when a man has lost hope, ambition, his faith in human nature and everything that makes life worth while, if he has gone down into the depths and still has the desire come to take up life again, there any quality left that will help him?"

"Yes," Dorcas moved as if by a sudden impulse and laid her fingers upon the man's arm; "he has honor. So long as one is a man of honor, there is no end of a chance."

"A man of honor!" As he repeated the words his face paled suddenly. It was the same attribute which Enoch had accorded to him.

Dorcas watched him intently, her eyes full of eager anticipation. She could see him undergo some strange mental struggle. When he looked at her his face had changed. Instead of



"I Promise to Stand by You," She Whispered.

apathy there were lines of grim determination about his mouth.

"Miss Dorcas," he said slowly, "make 'Cordelia' the woman you are yourself. I am weak and broken now, as 'John Esterbrook' was; still a chance came to him at the end. I will do the best I can—if you stand by me."

Dorcas stooped for a second. With a caressing touch she swept the lock from his forehead. "I promise to stand by you," she whispered. "Good night."

CHAPTER X.

Zilla Paget.

"Do you mind if I am atrociously frank with you?"

It was Grant Oswald who spoke. Enoch Wentworth and he sat far back in the darkened orchestra at the Gotham, watching a rehearsal.

Wentworth nodded, but turned a startled glance upon the man beside him.

"Simply because I know how powerful your play is, I want to suggest a touch that will make it stronger."

"What?"

"Understand, this is not criticism. If you don't think well of it we'll never mention it again." Oswald approached the subject diplomatically. He had begun to discover a strangely uneven temper in Enoch. There were days when he stood upon the heights of triumphant anticipation, then came intervals when everything and everybody were at odds.

"What did you think of changing?" "It is not changing," Oswald spoke thoughtfully. "What I have in mind

(To Be Continued.)

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