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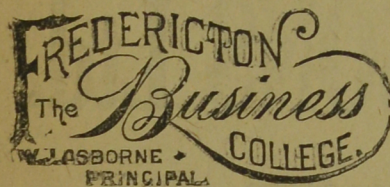
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The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman
from Wolverton"

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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From a shadowy corner near the fireside Merry rose and crept across the room. He dropped on his knees beside her and soothed her without a word, as one broods over an unhappy child. The warm grip in which he held her hand between his own gave her courage and hope. She rose to her feet and he led her to the window where she sat down and looked out into the dark, quiet square. Out of her memory rose the thought of an early morning—it was only a year ago—when she had seen Andrew Merry for the first time, stretched listlessly on the park bench, with a gray, thin fog occasionally blotting him from her sight. It was here, too, she had sat watching children scuffle through wind-blown leaves, while she heard her brother read the manuscript of "The House of Exeterbrook." Merry

sat silent at her side until the nurse entered the room.

"Miss Wentworth," she said, "Dr. Mowbray wants you. Your brother has been conscious for a few minutes. He cannot speak, but he wants something. Will you come?"

They followed the woman swiftly. Enoch's eyes sought hers with piteous pleading which was almost agony. She bent to kiss him. His gaze traveled to Merry and the agony seemed to change to peace.

"You saved his life, Enoch," she whispered.

Andrew laid his fingers gently upon the nerveless hand which rested outside the sheet. The eyes of the two men met; in those of one was a mute prayer for forgiveness, in the other's shone gratitude and the old affection grown steadfast.

Enoch's lips moved. He was trying to speak. Dorcas laid her ear close to his mouth.

"He wants his keys," she said quickly.

The nurse left the bedside and returned with a bunch of small keys strung upon a steel ring. Dorcas laid them in her brother's hand. It was pitifully inert! She lifted them and ran them through her fingers, one by one, as a Catholic tells her beads in a rosary. Her gaze was fixed upon his eager eyes. When she touched a shining brass key a gleam of relief shone in the man's beseeching eyes. She rose, to her feet.

"I will go at once, Enoch, and find it. I shall know what you want, whatever it is, and will bring it to you."

The doctor followed Merry and Dorcas to the door. "Don't come back unless I send for you. The exertion has been too much for him."

"This is the key to a small drawer in Enoch's desk," explained the girl. "I can probably guess what he wants. I ought to show it to him. If his mind is set on something he may sleep quietly when he knows I have found it."

"I will call you if he does not sleep," said the doctor.

Merry walked to the window and stared vaguely into the darkness. A little clock on the mantel struck three. Once he looked over his shoulder at Dorcas. He could hear the crackle of silk paper as she unfolded a few long, narrow sheets which were tied in a thin bundle.

"I have found Enoch's will and a number of business papers. Here are his bankbooks and the contract with Oswald for the play. There are bonds and things of that sort—things I do not understand. I imagine," the girl's voice broke into a sob, "it must be the will he wants."

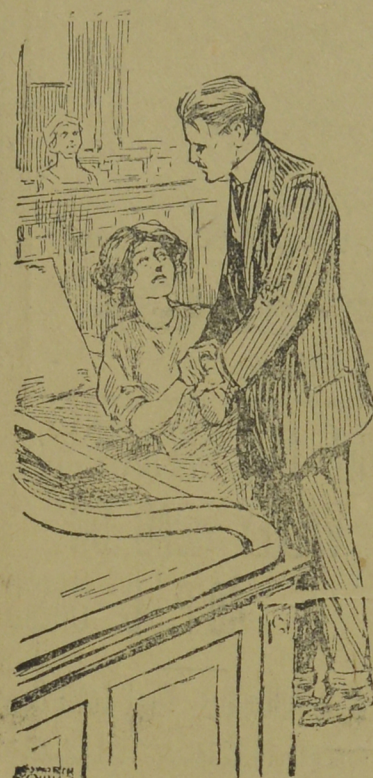
"Probably, it is, dear," said Andrew gently. She laid the papers on the desk and lifted a yellow envelope. There was no writing upon it; it was unsealed. She took out a slip of paper and stood motionless while she read it. Then her fingers moved in a groping way to turn on a blaze of electricity under the green globe above the desk.

"The room is so dark," she murmured. She dropped the paper upon the blotter in front of her and leaned upon the desk with her face between her hands.

"Andrew," cried Dorcas with a stifled moan, "come here!"

He crossed the room and stood looking down over the girl's shoulder. "See," she whispered, "see what I have found! Tell me what it is?" Her fingers pointed to the bond. She

stretched out her hand as if searching for protection and help. The man clasped it between his own, then she raised her eyes to his.



"Was it this that laid behind every thing?"

stretched out her hand as if searching for protection and help. The man clasped it between his own, then she raised her eyes to his.

"Was it this, Andrew, this that lay behind everything—that made you give up your play and—"

Merry's lips parted, but he did not speak. Dorcas glanced at the date. She withdrew her hands from his and put her fingers across her eyes as if trying desperately to remember something.

"Why," she cried suddenly, "the date was May 29, last year; that was two days after I came home from the convent." Her forehead knitted into a puzzled frown. "It must have been that night—that morning—when Enoch had a stag party, and I— after you—"

the first time I saw you. I have told you about it—when you sat out there waiting for a bus."

"Yes," he whispered.

"Then afterwards," she raised her head with a quick gesture, "we went to Juniper Point. There you told me about your play—and you went away to write it?"

She paused, waiting for Merry to answer. She did not raise her eyes. Her head was bent as if she took the shame of her brother upon her own shoulders.

"Yes," The man spoke in a slow whisper.

"Then you came back, with the play finished, and read it to Enoch, and he—he claimed it—because he held this against you?" She laid a trembling finger upon the sheet of paper.

"Yes."

Dorcas sat perfectly still with her arms lying on the desk. Merry bent over and gently touched her cheek.

"Oh!" she shrank away from him with a shuddering cry. "Oh, how could you let him do such a thing! It was so cruel, so inconceivably cruel, so shameful, and so unjust! It was such a mistake! Why did you let my brother do such a thing?"

"I don't know," Merry spoke abruptly.

"Tell me why you let him do it," persisted the girl.

"I don't believe I can explain—to you." There was a hopeless tone in the man's voice. "For a while it seemed to me like a poker debt. Women cannot understand a poker debt."

"No, I cannot understand," confessed Dorcas. Then she went on hurriedly: "Was that your only reason?"

"No, I felt that way at first. Then—it seemed foolish. One night I determined for a minute to set myself free, to get the play back, and to make you understand. It was the night—that night—when you took me home—when you found me in the—when you gave me new courage and a fresh outlook on life—when you made a man of me."

Dorcas rose and stood facing him with her eyes searching him. "Why didn't you do it?" she asked.

"Because," said Merry unsteadily, "do you remember you—no I—I—asked you—when a man had fallen as low as I had if he had anything left that would pull him to his feet. You said, 'Yes, so long as he has honor, there is no end of a chance for him.'"

"Oh!" cried Dorcas aghast. "Oh, to think that I should have put that in your way!"

"Put what in my way? Dearest, that night I came around the corner—I had been wandering in the desert. Suddenly I found sunshine. I found love and hope. I found you. That night—when you went away—I began to understand that it was the most wonderful chance God ever put in a man's way."

An instant later his arms were about her and she felt his kiss upon her cheek.

"Don't," cried Dorcas. "Don't!" She freed herself from his clasp and held him away from her. "Can't you understand, don't you see, Andrew, after what Enoch did to you, that I cannot be your wife?"

"You cannot—be—my—"

He stared at her in bewildered dismay.

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