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Furnisher

The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman
from Wolvertons"

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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Enoch walked to the mantel, leaned his elbow upon it, and stared down at her. "I'll give you exactly ten minutes to explain what you want. If it is about your child, I am quite as anxious to get him out of my house as you are."

"My child! I will relieve your mind on that point immediately. It is not my child I want. If your sister wants to play foster-mother, she is quite welcome to him. When I think of it," she began slowly to draw off her gloves, "Mrs. Wentworth has really done me a great favor."

"Oblige me then," Enoch's voice was full of cold indifference, "by getting down to business as quickly as possible. You must be gone before my sister comes in."

"Indeed," the actress looked up into his face with an insolent smile. "Why should we hurry? I want to ask you a few questions. I understand you are writing a new play." She turned to glance at the litter of manuscript on his desk. "Is there a part in it for me?"

"I have not begun to place parts yet."

"All?" She watched him with calm scrutiny. "How is it coming along? Will it be as big a go as 'The House' has been?"

"The play of your business?" "Probably not; still, I am interested. I have been wondering," she spoke slowly, as if thinking aloud, "if it can possibly come up to the expectations of the public. A second play is often such a rotter."

"What in thunder are you driving at?" asked Enoch fiercely. She sprang to her feet and faced him. There was a malevolent sneer in her face.

"My opinion is that anything you could do would be a rotter."

"Why?" Zilla Paget drew one hand from her muff and pulled out a few sheets of crumpled paper. She laid them on the table, smoothing them carefully with the blank side up. Suddenly she turned them over and placed both her hands firmly on the paper.

Enoch took a few steps forward and peered down through his glasses. His gait grew unsteady and his fingers gripped the edge of the table. A purplish flush swept over his cheeks, then he became ghastly pale. His very lips grew white. There were gray hollows about his eyes like the shadows which creep into a face after death. His mouth moved, but he did not utter a word, because his tongue touched dry lips.

"I knew you would understand," murmured the woman.

Wentworth's hands sprang at her wrists like the grip of a wild beast snatching at its prey.

"Don't," entreated the actress. "You hurt terribly. You do not know how strong you are. Besides—you are foolish, horribly foolish. If you should tear this, it is nothing but Exhibit A. There are hundreds of sheets where it came from. And let me tell you—they are where you won't find them."

Wentworth unclasped her wrists, but his eyes were blazing with murderous fury. He turned with a quick gesture to the wall behind him. Against a rug of Oriental saffron hung a collection of savage weapons. The woman watched him with cool unconcern. He seemed to be searching rapidly with his eyes for something. He laid his hand upon a long thin dagger. Here and there the blade had rusted to blackness, but its edge was deadly keen. He jerked the point of it into his blotting pad. It curled over lithely, as a Ferrara does. When he glanced at the woman beside the table. His eyes were glittering with the bloodthirsty passions of the primitive man.

Zilla Paget lifted a lorgnette which hung at her wrist by a jeweled chain. She clicked it open, raised it to her eyes—and laughed.

"I wonder," she murmured, "if you realize how ridiculous you look. You are too white-livered to do such a thing as that. Besides," she glanced about the sunlit room, "where could you hide the body?"

Enoch tossed the blade upon his desk and began to walk up and down the floor. He rolled his handkerchief into a hard ball and dabbed with it continually at his moist forehead. The woman sat perfectly still. She turned to fold the sheets of paper, then she laid one hand upon them and lay back gracefully in her chair.

Wentworth turned on her with a sudden question. "How much do you want for—Exhibit A and the rest of the evidence?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have no intention of selling it."

"Then what's your price?" Enoch's question snapped like a pistol shot.

She looked up at him with a decisive smile.

"My price is ridiculously small, much less than it is worth. I am merely coming here—to live."

"You are coming here—to live? Here—in the house—with my sister?"

"Here—in the house—with your sister," she repeated mockingly. "Exactly. I have taken a fancy to this part of the city. It is rather attractive for New York. I think I shall enjoy the society of your—sister. You will not find me a troublesome guest. I can fit in happily to your home circle. Part of my luggage is here in the hall, you know. The rest is down-stairs."

A wave of scarlet swept over Enoch's face.

"To think of Merry squaring up through—you. It's the most infernal scheme ever concocted."

"That's a bally bad guess of yours. Merry does not come into this at all."

"Where did you get these?" Enoch spoke fiercely and pointed to the

sheets of paper that lay under her hand.

"It's rather an unusual story. Sit down and I'll tell it to you. If you are searching for a plot for that new play of yours, you might find this worth while."

Wentworth threw himself into the chair in front of his desk and wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Did you ever hear of George Volk?" asked Miss Paget.

Enoch's forehead corrugated into a puzzled frown.

"I met him in London seven years ago," she continued, "and I was such a bally fool I married him. In those days he was a heroic looking figure. If you saw him as he is today you might say I had showed poor taste."

Wentworth sat staring at her with sullen curiosity.

"I have found out that he is in New York and that ten years ago he had been married here. Also that his wife



"Yes, Curse It!" Repeated Zilla With an Amused Laugh.

and child are alive. Interesting situation, isn't it? Bigamy releases a woman, though I had not felt terribly fettered. I have George Volk to thank for bringing that brat across. It was one of his masterly little schemes of revenge. Then, in a curious way, I learned that Volk's wife is the woman you call Alice Bourne. He laid a scheme to get money out of her yesterday. I got a detective and planned to face him when he reached his wife."

"What the devil has Volk and your matrimonial affairs to do with that?" Wentworth pointed to the sheets of paper beside her on the table.

"Don't be in such a blooming hurry. I tell you the situation is dramatic. I went to the house where Alice Volk lives in Harlem—oh, I was disguised, I tell you; you would never have known me. The detective got in first and opened the area door. I slipped in and waited. He was to give me a signal when Volk arrived. A servant came clumping down the cellar stairs after coal. I hid in a closet where they store trash and—waste paper."

Enoch's eyes narrowed and a yellow pallor crept over his face. "Curse it!" He spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, curse it!" repeated Zilla Paget with an amused laugh. "My word! it was a blooming queer accident! I closed the door, the latch caught and I couldn't get out. There I was, locked in that beastly hole. I struck a match. It was lucky I had a match-box along. Then I found an electric light. The first thing my eyes lit on among that waste was a sheet of paper. I picked it up. I had seen the writing before."

"Whose was it?" stammered Wentworth.

"Whose was it? Don't put up that bluff on me," cried the actress scornfully. "It was Merry's, of course. You recognized it in a second. It was the last speech I made in the second act—as it used to be—before you, the author, changed it."

"Well," cried Enoch fiercely. The woman paused and turned to him with an amused smile.

"I had forgotten about George Volk. He never showed up. He does not count anyway. I found the whole play in that closet."

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