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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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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 as 'The House'
has been?"

"It is any 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 at 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 seating
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
sneering 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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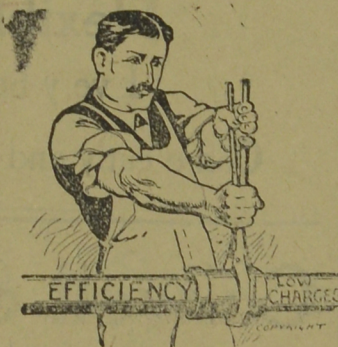
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