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The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman
from Wolbertons"

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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CHAPTER XXII.

Facing the Situation.

Enoch had never been a drinking man. The sight of drunkenness had frequently aroused in him a species of stomachic revolt; therefore mere physical repulsion had done much to keep him from one form of debauchery. During the days of utter desolation that followed his sister's departure he turned to whiskey as the sufferer from insomnia seeks relief in an opiate. It did not bring ease, however, either of body or mind. He went about in a dull, half-sickened stupor, hating himself and the world. One night, in a lonely room of the hotel where he had taken refuge, he sat in the darkness for hours thinking; then like a flash he saw himself. It seemed to him that for a second a shutter—somewhere, perhaps in some remote lobe of his brain—had flashed open and he saw not only his present condition, but his future. It was not a pleasant phantom.

A half-empty bottle of whiskey stood at his elbow. He stared at it for a minute with a scowl, as if it were an actual enemy. A feeling of nausea crept over him. He lifted it, carried it to the wash-bowl, and poured the liquor down the drain-pipe. Then he laid the empty bottle on a tray and set it outside the door. He filled his pipe with tobacco, pulled a chair to the window, sat down, and stared at the lights of the city. He fell into one of his introspective moods. He began to trace backward every step he had taken since the day he exacted the forfeit of Merry's bond. He felt like a vessel which had slipped its moorings and had been unmercifully buffeted by one tempest after another. Each one had done its work so ruthlessly that he was a human derelict left swamped and scuttled. The phrase "a human derelict" stuck obstinately in his brain; it described him vividly. Already he had had more than his deserts. The vengeance of Zilla Paget was the last straw. The woman's image flashed before his eyes; he heard her satanic laugh and saw a

"Jason, do you know how a guest lives in a hotel when he wants to be alone, absolutely alone? He eats in his own room, his mail is brought to him, he goes and comes without a word being spoken to him by anyone in the house. You understand?"

"Yassir."

"I wish to have that sort of service in my home until—your mistress returns. If it is necessary, engage another servant to look after your duties. I want you to wait on me exactly as I have explained. You can do it, Jason?"

"I'll be mighty glad to do it, Marso Enoch."

Wentworth returned to the theater and took up his duties as if nothing had happened. His associates greeted him with their usual courtesy; still he felt as if a drop curtain had fallen between him and the world where his daily labor lay. Women and a few men shrank away from him even while they seemed trying to be polite, sometimes kind.

Zilla Paget made no secret of her change of residence. She flaunted the news of it abroad and Wentworth's lapse from the conventionalities of life made a nine-days gossip in theatrical circles. It even agitated moralities which had been esteemed lenient. The reason back of the intensity of feeling was not, in every case, shocked virtue, but Dorcas was loved, while the Englishwoman was held in universal contempt and hatred.

Curiosity threw out its dragnet among the people in the company, who watched Wentworth go and come among them day after day, treating Miss Paget with an aversion which was colder than anything doled out to her by the players at the Gotham.

"I tell you, it's a pose with Wentworth," said John Breen, the man who played the janitor.

"Pose nothing," answered his wife scornfully. "Wentworth hates Paget worse than any of us do, and that is going some. I've watched them together. She knows he hates her, even if she is living alone with him under the same roof. He's afraid of her. I've seen it in his eyes when he didn't know anybody was watching. If I don't miss my guess there's blackmail or something like that back of it. She's fit for it. Wentworth's a goat in some way that we're not on to."

It was several days after his return to business before Enoch met his sister. He heard in a casual way that she had rented an apartment and had taken Alice Volk with the two children to live with her. Their first encounter was an ordeal to each one. They came face to face in the foyer. Enoch said "Good morning" and held out his hand. The girl held it for a second, looking up into his face with eager wistfulness. The ghost of a smile broke over Enoch's haggard face, then he glanced backward as the glass door behind him slammed, and Zilla Paget came rustling in.

He turned brusquely and entered his office. The jaded look in his eyes had changed to shuddering hate. Dorcas passed out to join the throng on Broadway. She felt chilled and lonely. She did not realize that the sun was shining.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Parting of the Ways.

"All I have left to say, Wentworth, is this—we have come to a crossroad and you must choose between two paths: either cut that woman out of your life or don't expect to take your place among decent citizens."

There was a look of discomfort and anxiety in Grant Oswald's pale, high-bred face while he spoke, although his voice was emphatic. Enoch did not answer. He moved restlessly in his chair once or twice, lifted a program that lay on his desk, and ran his eyes through its pages. Oswald paused as if waiting for a reply.

"I can't understand your infatuation, Wentworth," he went on; "the woman degenerates every day of her life. God knows, I feel culpable for even bringing her across the ocean. Then I ought to have let her go when I spoke of it a month or two ago. She was bound to do mischief, only I never dreamed that you would fall into her clutches. I warned you."

Enoch sat in sullen stillness, with his eyes fixed on a calendar which hung above the desk.

"I wish," Oswald's tone was almost wistful, "that you would at least talk it over. I think I can deal with the woman if anyone can. I have always treated her with a certain stand-offishness that she resents. She has tried, more than once, to cross the line I drew. She didn't succeed, and it galls her. I never put into words what I think of her. She understands, however, that I recognize her value dramatically, while personally—to me—she is offensive. If she has you in her power, won't you tell me? It would never go beyond these walls. She knows that I know her story. Low as she has sunk, she realizes that it is not what the world would call a creditable story. I can handle her easily."

A gleam of relief and hope drifted for a moment across Wentworth's face. Then he laughed nervously and the sullen frown returned to his eyes. He rose and began to pace the office floor with nervous footsteps.

"Won't you trust me?" pleaded Oswald. "I have a real regard, Wentworth, for you as well as for your genius. I would do it for your sister, if for no other reason. There is time enough yet to pull away, but," he spoke abruptly, "it won't be long. The woman has dragged more than one man to the gutter or to—suicide." Wentworth laughed disagreeably.

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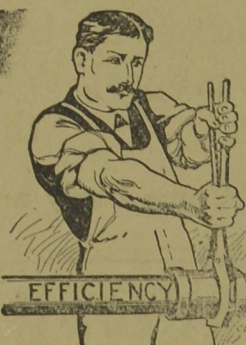
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fleeting vision of his picturesque golden-haired loveliness as he had slammed the door and left his home.

Wentworth gritted his teeth savagely, then he looked at his watch. It was close to midnight. He went downstairs, paid his bill, ordered a carriage, and drove to the Waverly Place house. As he stood fitting the key noiselessly into the lock his heart beat tumultuously for a second or two. He opened the door stealthily and passed through the vestibule. The house was still and a lamp burned dimly in the hall, as Jason always left it until his master returned. He hung his hat on the rack, stole upstairs to his own room, switched on the electricity, and glanced about. He locked the door and undressed swiftly. Ten minutes later he was sleeping the death-like sleep which follows complete exhaustion of brain and body.

He did not wake till noon. Jason answered his ring. The old negro entered with hesitating steps.

"Good morning," said his master.

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