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A big bottle for a quarter.

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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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"Well, it won't be suicide," he answered harshly.

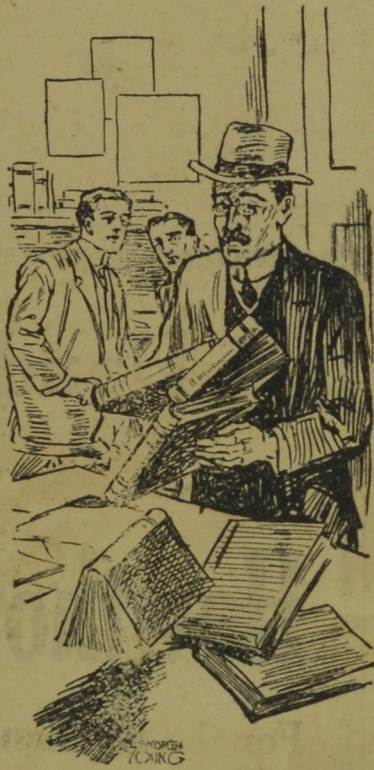
"Don't be too sure. When a man who has always had a fair amount of self-respect begins to lose it, he usually faces two alternatives; that is, unless he has a solid anchor in his home."

Enoch lit a cigar and began to smoke.

"Evidently it is useless to talk. What passed my understanding is how any man can turn out a woman like your sister to give shelter to Zilla Paget. I hate to say it, Wentworth, you will set me down as a cad, but I prefer to have a separate office. I am willing to take the little back room, or you can. One suits me as well as the other."

"Certainly," Wentworth leaped to his feet alertly. "I'll change at once. I'd hate to thrust my society upon anyone who does not care for it."

"It is not your society I mean wholly. I object to Miss Paget dropping



Dropped an Armful of Books on His Desk.

in here as she did today. Don't hurry, I did not mean that—"

"I don't care what you meant. I can make the change at once." Enoch's voice was cheerful. He began to drag volumes from the bookcase beside him and heap them upon the top of his desk. "You made yourself tolerably plain, don't spoil it with politeness."

He pulled the papers from pigeon-holes in his desk and tossed them about in loose piles, dropping some in the waste basket and bundling others together with rubber bands.

Oswald's pen was traveling slowly across a sheet of paper when some one tapped softly at the door. Merry entered. Enoch did not turn his head. The actor seated himself beside Oswald's desk.

"I could not show up this morning when you phoned," he explained. "I have been arranging for a funeral. It's one of those funerals which have no great string of carriages."

"Who's dead?"

"George Volk."

Oswald laid down his pen and stared at Merry. "George Volk? When did he drift back to America?"

"Nobody seems to know anything about him. It's a mercy though; it sets Alice free."

"How did she take it?" asked the Englishman quickly.

"I haven't told her yet."

"Where did he die? The last time you heard of him was in England, wasn't it?"

"Yes. This morning I came to the theater to get a letter I left in my dressing-room and ran into a policeman who was looking for Alice Volk. I asked him what he wanted. They found a letter addressed to her on a man who was killed last night down near the bridge. I've been with the officer since 10 o'clock."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. I've looked after everything. But I want your advice on one point. What do you think of not telling her—till he is buried?"

"It's the best plan. I supposed he had fallen pretty low."

"Low?" Merry shrugged his shoulders. "I did not know such dives existed as the place where I found him. He had been lying there soaked to the point of insensibility for two weeks. He was too horrible a sight for the eyes of any woman."

"What an end!" exclaimed Oswald. "The man once stood on a pinnacle that many an actor would give half a lifetime to win. He had—"

The Englishman and Merry both looked up quickly. Wentworth had dropped an armful of books noisily on his desk. He opened the door which led to the inner office, passed through, then slammed it sharply behind him.

### CHAPTER XXIV.

#### The Yellow Envelope.

More than one "summer show" had begun to blazon an alluring sign over the door of a Broadway theater before "The House of Esterbrook" closed its season. The fame of the play had gone abroad through the country, and night after night, long after the residence part of New York showed a labyrinth of boarded fronts, every seat in the Gotham was sold before the curtain went up.

The house was packed to the roof on the night the play closed. It was the middle of June and the city had grown uncomfortably hot. Wentworth had spent a restless day. It seemed to him as if the air was filled with anticipation. He overheard the Breens discuss their plans for the summer in a Maine camp. Julie Volk had approached him, half shy, half eager, to tell of a shore cottage where they were to stay with Dorcas until the season opened. Telegrams came and went, everyone in the theater had a message except himself. He felt forsaken and isolated amid the excitement of a closing night. He had no ties—not a human being cared whether he came or went. There was a house—he held the title deeds for it, he paid taxes and hired servants to care for it—but it was not a home. Only a year ago the three of them had gone holidaying, as care-free as children. Ages had passed since last summer.

He wandered about the theater in aimless, unseeing fashion. The world seemed to have grown intolerable. He hated the gay laughter in the audience, the rustling of fans, and the buzz of voices between the acts. The orchestra had chosen airs that jarred upon his inmost nerves. He stood watching the throng when suddenly he wondered how he should meet tomorrow and every tomorrow of a long, lonely, inactive summer.

Before the curtain fell on the last act he strolled through the darkened house and opened a narrow door behind the lower boxes. A few shadowed steps led to the stage. A man stood inside with his fingers moving over the buttons, which flooded the stage with light or shadow. Wentworth pushed past him and walked swiftly behind the drops until he reached a corner which was comparatively deserted. He stood inside a wing, watching the company take their curtain calls. Last of all came Merry, alone. The insistent applause impetuned a speech. Wentworth smiled grimly. Andrew's one terror was a speech. He saw the actor glance about him appealingly, then his eyes signaled to the man who controlled the curtain. It began to descend with quiet deliberation. Merry paused for a moment, then he came back.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I had hoped—"

While Wentworth stood listening he wondered why the descent of the curtain did not stop. He turned and whispered a command to the stagehand who stood beside him. The man's face was deathly white, he looked paralyzed with terror. In a second Enoch realized that something in the machinery had lost its grip. The house had grown still, while Merry stood smiling and talking in his nonchalant fashion. A young man with a gleaming expanse of shirt front rose from a lower box and set his foot upon the railing, preparing to climb over to the stage. A woman stood beside him clasping her hands and staring at Merry with horror-stricken eyes. Her face grew as white as the lace robe she wore. Then she shrieked, a long, shivering cry of terror. Enoch sprang toward the footlights with one swift leap, holding his arm over his head as if to ward off the heavy curtain, which was still descending. He seized Merry with a desperate grip and tossed the actor far back on the stage, then he fell with the ponderous curtain across his inert body. His closed eyes were facing the glare of the footlights.

Dorcas and Merry, in a swift motor, reached the Waverly Place home before the ambulance, and a famous surgeon came close at their heels. When the operation was over they laid Wentworth upon his own bed. The surgeon stood looking down on the unconscious face. Blood was welling slowly from the wound on his forehead and made a wide stain upon the snowy bandage. The man turned to look at Dorcas: her makeup lay in smudges upon her face and she wore the blue cotton gown which belonged to "Cordelia" in the last act; her fingers clenched each other, while she turned an imploring gaze to the quiet face of the surgeon.

"I do not know—yet," he whispered, answering the question in his eyes; "it is too soon to tell. He lived through it, and it is one of those operations when the patient does not always live."

Somebody led her away. In a dazed fashion she knew that Alice Volk bathed her face and braided her hair into two long strands and changed her stage gown for a soft kimono. Then Merry took her hand and she followed him to the library. She lay down upon a couch feeling as if every nerve in her body had an ear and was listening. The house was perfectly still. Once in her mind she used that phrase, "Still as death." Afterwards she fell into a shivering fit; the tears came, and she sobbed so fiercely that the agony seemed to tear at her throat.

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