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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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He was aroused by a clatter of
dishes. The waiter set the breakfast
before him. As he ate he laid a morn-
ing paper on the table and began to
read; there had been no chance earlier
in the day to glance at it. The first
thing his eye fell upon was a column
about "The House of Esterbrook."
The public seemed to await the pro-
duction with unusual anticipation.
Merry had the enthusiastic following
which is so often bestowed upon an
erratic, lovable genius. Wentworth's
fame as a journalist was of long stand-
ing, and Oswald, Englishman as he
was, had already won friends among
newspaper men. Wentworth read it
quickly, then he turned to the news of
the day. Nothing interested him—the
sparkle had gone out of life as the
dead dies on champagne. He drank a
second, then a third cup of strong cof-
fee, which acted upon him as whisky
does on some men.

When he climbed the uneven steps
of the sidewalk the world had grown

dimmer; there was a future before
him, fame, riches, and the applause of
millions. He reached Third avenue,
ran up the stairs to the elevated, and,
puffing slowly at a cigar, gazed on the
rush of life below. He was deliberat-
ing how it was best to approach Merry
on the subject of changing that second
act. Oswald was a keen critic, and
Enoch had seen the necessity of it him-
self; it was the one weak spot in the
play. From the moment when he
burned the labor of half a lifetime he
realized his own incapacity for play-
writing. He himself could do nothing
so the drama, but he felt a chill of
error at the thought of speaking to
Merry on the subject.

CHAPTER XI.

The Volks.

A city's electric lights were begin-
ning to blaze through the twilight
when Wentworth knocked at the door
of Merry's dressing room.

"Come!" cried the actor sharply.

As Enoch entered he felt a throb of
longing for the old warm friendship.
Andrew's face paled for a moment as
he looked up at his visitor. He nodded
but did not speak. Kelly, who acted
as Merry's valet during his prosperous
seasons, lifted a heap of garments from
a chair and set it before Enoch, who
took it in silence. Andrew sat
staring into a mirror while he ex-
perimented with a make-up for the
broken-down convict in the third act.
He dashed line after line into his face,
blending each lightly into the grease
paint. Nobody spoke—even Kelly
seemed to have fallen under the spell
of quiet. He knelt on the floor polish-
ing shoes with stolid industry. Enoch
wondered curiously what the keen old
Irishman was thinking. He had known
nothing between them but a most frat-
ernal friendship. The silence became
oppressive. At last Wentworth spoke.

"Are you going to be alone soon,
Merry? I want to have a talk with you
about business."

Andrew did not look up while he an-
swered carelessly. "I'll be alone in a
few minutes. Kelly has an errand to
do at the tailor's. You may go now,"
he added, nodding to the valet; "there's
no hurry about the shoes."

When the old man shut the door be-
hind him Andrew did not turn his
gaze from the mirror. The reflection
of Wentworth's face was close beside
his own. He could see that his visitor
was ill at ease.

"Well?" he said interrogatively.
"Can't you turn round and face me
while we talk?" asked the elder man
impatiently.

Andrew wheeled about and his eyes
met Wentworth's calmly. "Certainly,
I can face you."

The red surged into Enoch's face,
then hard lines wrinkled about his
mouth. His mood had changed. He
spoke with brutal consciousness.

"Oswald and I have decided that
there ought to be a few changes made
in the text of the play."

"Of your play," corrected Merry.

"There is one weak point in it,"
Enoch went on deliberately. "Mrs.
Esterbrook" draws on the sympathy
of the audience for a few moments
when 'Cordelia' leaves her. A woman
of that caliber could have no such feel-
ing."

"No?"

"No," Wentworth repeated the word
almost furiously. He began to twist
his hands.

"I suppose that act ought to be re-
written."

"Not rewritten, simply elaborated.
Strike out some lines, put in others."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Why don't I do it?" Enoch jumped
to his feet shaken by a sudden impulse
of rage. "That's a nice question to ask
me."

"It has never seemed to me there
was anything particularly nice in the

whole situation. Andrew's tones
were on a calm level.

"We'll leave that out of the question
altogether," growled Wentworth. "I
should never have intruded upon you
but for this reason. You can see the
exigencies of the case. You've got to
retouch the play."

"I will not lay a pen to the play,"
Andrew turned as if the conversation
were at an end and began to pencil
careworn wrinkles on his cheeks.

Enoch tipped his chair back against
the wall, put his feet on the rungs, and
began to think. Nobody knew so well
as he that one faced a barricade with
Merry in a doggedly obstinate mood.
Inwardly he was at white heat; the
blind groping hope for reconciliation
was at an end; still he knew if he
ever needed diplomacy it was now. If
he were to precipitate a storm, Merry
was capable of flinging over his
engagement at the last moment.

"Let me explain," began Wentworth
aboriously. A tap at the door inter-
rupted him. It was opened and Os-
wald stepped in. He seated himself
on the edge of a trunk.

"Have you mentioned to Mr. Merry
the suggestion I made about the sec-
ond act?" he asked, turning to Went-
worth.

"We were discussing it when you
came in."

"What do you think of it, Merry?"

"I really have not had time to give
it a thought," Andrew looked unin-
terested. "Besides, you know I do not
come into that act, and I have scarce-
ly seen it rehearsed." He picked up a
towel and began to wipe the make-up
off his face.

"It is simply this. 'Mrs. Esterbrook'
is an utterly heartless woman. Dead
on conscience as she is at the begin-
ning, she comes out of her life's trag-
edy calloused beyond all redemption.
It strikes a false note to have her re-
pent for even a second. She does not
know what mother-love or love of any

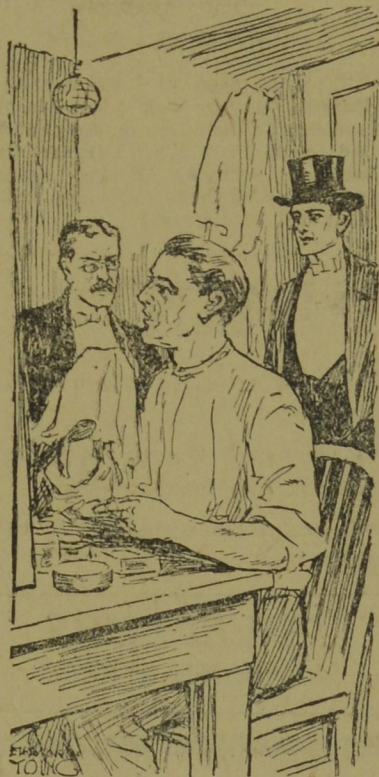
sort means. With her last exit she
ought to leave an audience hating and
despising her. Now one feels a sud-
den touch of sympathy. She must be
irredeemably bad. Then, too, it is not
only true to the woman's character,
but 'Cordelia' shines whiter against it."

Merry nodded. "You're right, I fancy.
Wentworth has only to change a few
lines to throw the whole thing plumb.
You can do it in half an hour, old
chap."

When Oswald turned to Wentworth
he caught a look on the man's face
that puzzled him, a flash of impotent
rage, hate, and apprehension. Enoch
realized he had revealed his soul for
a moment. He picked up his hat and
spoke brusquely. "You two finish talk-
ing it over, I have a thousand things to
tend to."

"Is Wentworth—is he touchy? Did
he feel that I was criticizing his play?"
asked Oswald anxiously when the door
closed with a hasty rap.

"I don't think it's that," Merry
spoke slowly, then he dashed to an-



Caught a Flash of Impotent Rage on
Wentworth's Face.

other subject. "I want to consult you
about changing one of the people in the
cast, little Katie Durham."

"Oh, the child in the first act?"

"She's a bright enough youngster,"
he told me she once got a hundred
dollars a week in vaudeville as a
dancer." Merry laughed. "A top-
dancer scarcely fills the bill for the
small 'Cordelia.'"

"She struck me in rehearsal this
morning as lacking in something."

"She is lacking in everything. She's
a stilted, grown-up, little brat; there's
nothing childlike about her. When she
clings to my neck shrieking, 'Father,'
in that ear-splitting baby pipe of hers,
she jars every nerve in my body."

"Let her go. Only it is a problem
where to find a sweet, natural stage
child."

"I can lay my hands on one imme-
diately," said Merry quietly. "It's a
youngster who has never been behind
the footlights in her life."

"Could you do anything with her in
ten days?"

"I should like to try. She's a gen-
tle, refined, sweet-voiced little girl;
besides, she has dramatic blood in her
—that always tells. Do you remember
George Volk?"

"George Volk! Why, of course,"
cried Oswald after a moment's hesita-
tion. "What ever became of the man?
Did he die?"

(To Be Continued.)

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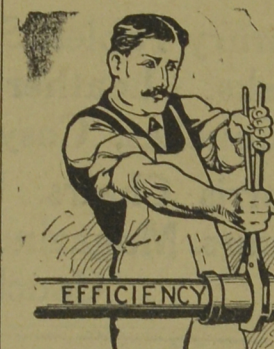
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