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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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chiseled by days and nights of pain, wrinkled about the quiet mouth. Merry sat staring at the haggard face with a dull, tugging hope in his soul, which he could not voice even to Dorcas. He wanted time—time enough to tell Enoch that the old enmity was dead, that the old love was alive, strengthened by new ties. A spasm of pain ran through the sick man's face, wrinkling the pallid forehead and twitching the lips. Merry looked up at the nurse. She read the question in his eyes.

"No," she whispered, "he is going to live. His brain is clear now. He has a great constitution. That was the only thing that saved him."

The woman had a strong, intelligent face and her manner was full of calm conviction. She was not young and must have watched over many a battle between life and death. She knew! Merry sighed with relief and peace of mind, even with a mad throbb of joy. The thought of Dorcas and the future came with the conviction that there was still time to take up the old bonds of love and to begin life again.

The face upon the pillow moved and Enoch's eyes opened slowly. Recognition flashed into them, then a smile crept about the lined mouth.

"Enoch!" The young man dropped on his knees beside the bed, his fingers stole under the sheet and caught in a strong grasp the hand which he had thought was slipping from his reach.

Wentworth's eyes held a breathless question. "You were not hurt?" he whispered.

"No, old man; no. I didn't have a scratch. You took it all. You saved my life, as you have done more than once, and, Enoch, you understand—we are back where we stood in the old days, with everything forgotten, everything buried, buried so deep that neither of us will ever give it another thought."

The thrill of warmth over that strongest of all things human—a broken friendship made warm and secure again—ran like the vigor of transfused blood through the veins of the sick man. Happiness flushed into the wan face and his feeble strength returned Merry's grip.

Andrew laughed aloud. "You understand, Enoch, we are friends—friends that nothing can separate again as long as life lasts."

The wistfulness of gratitude dimmed the eyes of the sick man. "As long as life lasts! That won't be a great while, Boy," he whispered huskily; "only now—it is all right—and it seems different. I felt like a coward a little while ago. You remember that writing chap who died lately? He said something just before he went. I thought of it this morning—I'm afraid to go home in the dark—wasn't that what he said? 'I felt lonely—and I know—'"

"Listen, Enoch," Merry spoke with a tone of passionate conviction. "Look here, old man, you're not going home in the dark, not yet. You've got thirty or forty years before that homegoing."

He turned imperatively to the nurse. "Push back the curtains, won't you? Push them away back. There's a glorious sun shining—let it in."

The woman understood. She ran up a curtain and flung back the shutters. The room grew suddenly white and radiant.

"There!" cried Merry. "Talk of going home in the dark? See how the sun is shining! Go home in the dark, the idea!"

A pathetic eagerness flushed into the eyes of the man on the bed. The glare of the sunshine showed clearly the wanness and ghastly shadows in the bandaged face.

"She says," the actor pointed over his shoulder at the white-gowned nurse, "she says you are out on the highroad—coming back to stay with us—indeed, you understand, Enoch? She knows. Don't you?" He looked into the woman's face with ardent pleading in his eyes.

She smiled and nodded. She was the embodiment of health and vigor. Her stalwart body and her wholesome rosy face were pleasant for sick eyes to look upon. "Yes, you've come back," she said emphatically. "When the doctor left an hour ago he said we had pulled you safely around the corner. Now all the job I have cut out for me is to see you are kept quiet and patient and happy."

"Yes, happy—that's the biggest part of the prescription," repeated Merry with a laugh.

The sick man looked up. The confession in his eyes was pathetic. "It seems ages since I was happy, Boy."

"Well, you're not going to be allowed to think, even to think of past ages. You've only to lie there and get well. It is our business—a sort of job cut out for Dorcas and me—to keep you happy. See?"

"I see," whispered Enoch. The flicker of a smile stole into his face. It brought peace and a pale, eager hopefulness, as if a thought of restitution and atonement was dawning in the man's soul. The nurse lowered the curtain and blotted out the radiance which flooded the room.

"The doctor has ordered quiet," she whispered, "and sleep—as much sleep as possible."

Merry rose and laid his hand on Wentworth's forehead. "You hear her orders, old man?" He laughed gaily. "It's no use running full tilt against the nursing profession. Each one of them thinks she knows it all! But I'm not going to say 'Good-by.' I mean to hang around here from dawn to dark and drop in every time I can sneak past her—or the doctor!"

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"Remember—it was your brother who saved my life," said Merry passionately. "How could I go on loving you, dearest? How could I stop loving you? I could go through hell for you, and yet I confess I would rather be with you in heaven." He flushed and his face grew grave. "You are mine—all mine—and I am yours, so wholly and truly yours that I have grown to think of this world as merely one spot—one little spot—where we can make a home and I can have you beside me—for the rest of my life."

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CHAPTER XXV.

In the Daylight.

Wentworth's chamber was dim as twilight when Merry entered. The outer world lay white and breathless under a dazzling sun, and the sudden change to a darkened sickroom for a moment made Andrew grope vaguely on the threshold. As his eyes became accustomed to the dusk he saw a white-gowned nurse standing beside the bed. Under the sheet lay the motionless outline of the man's long body, the head wound with snowy bandages. Merry's hands gripped together convulsively. The nails cut into his palms and an ache which hurt tugged at his heart. Wentworth's chamber held memories for him; he thought of nights when he had lain helpless upon that same bed and Enoch had taken care of him in a lumbering fashion. During these days he had seen the rugged face grow wan from want of sleep; still for him a smile always lit the stern features.

Suddenly, as the last remnant of an old scab sloughs off, every fragment of hatred, of resentment at injustice, of pain and rebellion which for ten months had been warping his nature and clouding his life fell away from Merry's heart. The love, the implicit confidence, even the boyish dependence upon the older man, came flooding back into his soul like a high tide. All that had stood between him and Wentworth seemed unimportant compared with the vital fact that they had been and still were friends.

When the nurse beckoned he stole noiselessly across the floor. She pointed to a chair by the bedside. "He has dozed off," she explained in a low whisper. "He asked for you just before he went to sleep. I told him you were coming. Sit here so that he can see you when he wakes up."

Merry dropped into the chair. He began to see perfectly through the gloom. Wentworth's grim, gaunt face had startled him for a minute. The eyelids were closed, with depths of shadow below them. The man's dominating nose stood out like a silhouette against the white pillow. The mustache had been shaved away and lines,

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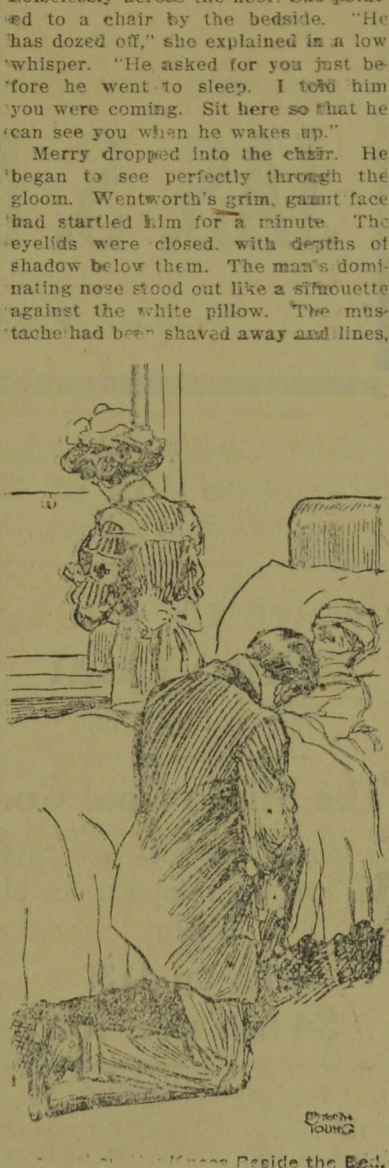
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