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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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She began to live over again the last few hours and drew a long breath as she remembered the strangling terror which laid hold of her before she made her first entrance. When she heard her cue she felt dumb, crippled, almost blinded for one moment. The smile on Zilla Paget's face, as she stepped from the wings, stung her into action. There was scorn in it, and cruelty smoothed over by a sweet, beguiling perfidy, which aroused in the girl a sudden hate that she had never felt in her life before. The hatred made her forget everything except her part.

The recollection of a bit of gossip had flashed to her memory: Zilla Paget had prophesied that her "Cordelia" would be a dead failure. Before the end of that second act the intense loathing and scorn which Merry had put into her lines became real. The woman understood. She shrank with a terror which was scarcely simulated during the girl's denunciation of a mother who had lost all claim upon a child for love or respect. Seven times the curtain rose and fell upon the two women. Once a volley of hisses was hurled at Zilla Paget, and she smiled in happy triumph. Oswald and Merry stood in the wings watching the act. The intensity which Dorcas threw into her part stirred both men strongly, as it did the audience. They had anticipated womanly sweetness and tenderness, but they had not gauged her emotion to the depths.

"I never dreamed she could do anything like this," said Oswald slowly. Merry did not speak. He had caught Zilla Paget's subtle smile. He knew there was more than acting in the scene.

While Dorcas sat gazing into the red caves of the coal fire she went over each situation in the play, step by step. Once she buried her face in the folds of her shawl; her cheeks were throbbing hotly. She felt Merry's kiss burn upon her lips. There had been no real kisses at rehearsal. The trust and love and gratitude with which the broken old convict turned to his child seemed real for a moment; she felt it when the actor touched her lips. Then she had fallen sobbing into his arms. She heard the audience sob with her. When she turned to glance aside through half-blinded eyes, she met the derisive smile of Zilla Paget, who stood in the wings. There was jealousy in her scorn. Her part was over for the night; she was dead to people in front. They had forgotten her, in spite of the applause she had won a half hour before. It hurt her vanity.

Dorcas came out of her reverie with a start. The door behind her closed, and Enoch walked in. His face was glowing with eager, impetuous triumph, his cheeks were flushed, and his eyes shone. He stooped suddenly to kiss his sister. She did not speak. It seemed years since she had seen him in such a mood.

"Dorry," he cried, "why did you rush home? Everybody was waiting to congratulate you. You lifted people off their feet; I swear, you took me off mine! The critics went wild over you and wanted to interview you. Tomorrow you'll be the talk of the town."

Everything that had blurred life seemed to vanish. It was wonderful that in a few hours the dreams of a lifetime should have come true. The girl laughed. Her heart had suddenly grown light.

"Enoch, I cannot make myself believe it."

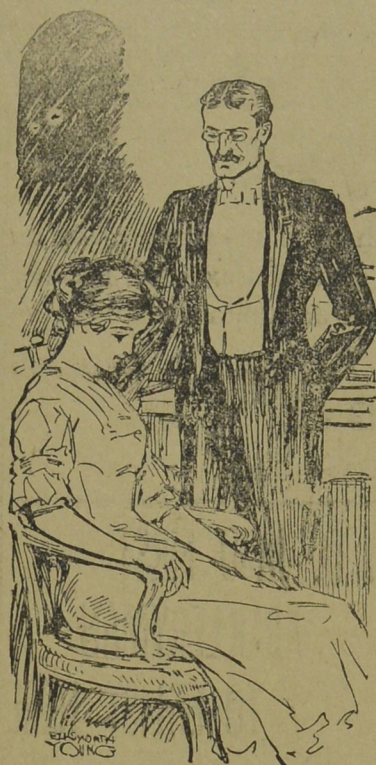
He stood beside her with a proud smile upon his lips. "Dorry, you're a queer proposition. Any other girl would have had her head turned by the triumph tonight. Why, child, in three hours you climbed straight onto a pedestal that many women work half a lifetime to reach. Even then they often miss it."

Enoch bent and lifted her face till her eyes looked into his. "There were minutes," he said fondly, "when I actually questioned whether it was the little sister herself or not."

Dorcas had never seen her brother so strangely excited. She wondered for a moment if he had been drinking, but she saw it was the intoxication of sudden success, not of wine. He paced about the library, talking, laughing, building a thousand plans for the future. The girl watched him curiously. It was a strange transition from the sullen silence of months.

The Enoch of light-hearted boyhood days had returned.

"You have a great future, Dorry." He stopped abruptly and his voice grew grave. "There is one thing I want to say. Don't," he hesitated and began to pace the room again, as if choosing his words carefully, "don't make a hero of Merry. He did not



"Dorry, you're a queer proposition." tonight, I have seen him set the whole town talking as he did in 'Esterbrook, then topple back and go down, away down."

Dorcas rose from her chair and tossed the long braids of hair over her shoulders. Her eyes and cheeks were blazing. Wentworth's face grew inexorable. "Enoch," she cried, "how dare you say such a thing—to me?" "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean!" He saw her chin tremble. In spite of her anger she was on the verge of tears. "When people were calling for the author, how did you dare to go out and take the applause? Have you no conscience, no honor left?"

"Merry got as much applause as one man could stand." He looked at her with dogged defiance.

"That makes you none the less—a thief."

Enoch did not answer. He pulled a cigar from his vest pocket, lit it, and began to smoke. He did not flinch before his sister's gaze.

"I should have been the happiest girl in the world tonight, almost foolishly happy." There was a pitiful quaver in her voice. "I feel now as if I were disgraced. Men have gone to the penitentiary for stealing—less than you did."

Wentworth laughed scornfully. He tossed his cigar into the heart of the fire and turned upon Dorcas in sudden rage. "Stealing is not a nice word."

"It is nice enough for what has happened."

"Do you know," asked Wentworth with grave deliberation, "what did happen? Has Merry ever taken you into his confidence about this transaction?" "Merry has never said one word against you—to me."

"Then reserve your judgment until he does. If you were to ask him, and if he played fair, he would tell you that it was a straight, honest bargain, a bargain bought and paid and signed for. Merry, with all his failings, is no wetcher."

"Bought and paid and signed for?" repeated the girl in slow bewilderment. "How could you buy and pay for something conceived by another man's brain and written by another man's hand?"

"That is my business, wholly," answered Enoch coldly. "It is an affair no woman would understand." He paused to light another cigar; then he turned to Dorcas with such authority as he had never used to her before.

"I want to say one thing before you leave this room. It is about the question of the authorship of this play. It is not to be brought up again at any time between us. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Dorcas answered quietly. "I understand it is perfectly useless to appeal to a conscience which is dead."

Enoch shrugged his shoulders. "If that is the way you choose to put it, well and good. It seems to me a pity that you cannot drop this altogether and—forget. The future looks bright for both of us. We could easily go back to our old happy life if you would."

Dorcas moved toward the door. "I cannot forget, I promise you one thing, Enoch, I will never speak of it again." "Thank you," said the man brusquely.

CHAPTER XV.

Master Robin Tully.

When the curtain dropped on the last act at a Saturday matinee, Dorcas paused on the way to her dressing-room and glanced out at the stage door. Rain was lashing the street in furious, wild-blown torrents. The few people who braved the storm bent their heads against it and plodded on with determination. Nearby, a street organ was wheezing the "Miserere" in pitiful appeal to a heedless crowd at the theater door.

Dorcas returned to her dressing-room. It was a delightfully cozy retreat—Mr. Oswald had seen to that. Alice Volk sat repairing a gown.

"Where's Juliet?" Dorcas demanded.

"She's asleep in our dressing-room."

The girl seated herself in front of the mirror and began to remove her make-up. At intervals she glanced over a bunch of letters which lay on the dressing table.

(To Be Continued.)

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