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The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

By
ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman
from Wolverton"

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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"Enoch is away. He's in Montreal, and there is nobody at home except Jason and me. I have so much to say to you," she cried appealingly. "We can't talk driving through the streets on such a night as this."

Merry stared at her for a minute with dogged obstinacy in his gaze. "Won't you come?" urged the girl impetuously. Her color deepened and an eager light shone in her eyes. "There is so much I want to say. We shall be quite alone. You can trust Jason. Afterwards you may go away—If you wish—and I will promise never to attempt to find you. I will try to forget you."

Merry stretched out his hand and touched her arm, leaning forward until his face was close to hers. "Miss Dorcas, don't say that. Since I left you that night on Juniper Point I have lived a lifetime of happiness and horror and remorse. One thing alone has saved me from going over the brink of the precipice, simply one thing." He lifted his eyes to hers. "The one thing," he repeated, "that I could not fling away was the memory that you trusted me, that you believed in me, and were waiting for me to make good."

"I trust you now," cried the girl, her voice breaking into a sob. "I am still waiting for you to make good. Won't you come home with me?"

The cab stopped in front of the Waverly Place home. Merry followed her reluctantly up the steps. She paused for a moment while she adjusted the key in the lock.

"Would you mind seeing Jason?" she asked hesitatingly. "He can help you with dry clothes. He will be as glad to see you as I am."

"Ring for him," answered Merry quietly. "Jason and I are old pals." Half an hour later Merry walked into the library where Dorcas was waiting for him. It seemed as if the mere resumption of clean, comfortable clothing, even though hunger still marked him, had given the man fresh valor, new dignity.

He laughed nervously. "It is a rejuvenation, isn't it?" he asked as he glanced at himself in the mirror. "Jason unearthed some duds I once left here."

Jason was an excellent valet, and a hot bath, a shave, and fresh raiment had made a man of Merry. The lock of fair hair which habitually fell over his forehead made him look almost boyish, although his face was pallid and careworn.

"I have eaten nothing since morning," Dorcas said. "I told Jason to serve supper here, on a little table beside the fire, where it is cozy and cheerful."

Merry dropped into a chair. He wondered if the intense enjoyment of the good things of life was pure sensuousness. The odor of hot coffee, the sight of a daintily set table, the radiance of a coal fire, the glow of red-shaded lights, and the storm shut out doors brought a tingling pleasure which seemed like mere animal gratification. He shivered for a moment as he listened to the storm. He wondered what had made it possible for him to brave homelessness and hunger and squalor. Looking back on it he realized he had borne it as a man lives through pain under the power of an anesthetic. The misery of his mind had dulled the sordid wretchedness of mere existence.

To Merry that supper was a festival, not wholly because it was the satisfying of ravenous appetite, but because it was the crisis of his life. Dorcas sensed that if her own hunger was real, Merry would not feel that she

was feeding a famished outcast. Jason beamed upon them in sheer enjoyment when he brought in full dishes and carried away empty ones. Dorcas was light-hearted and gay, as happy as they had been during their first acquaintance at the shore. For a moment, while Merry drank his coffee, the memory of a few horrible weeks intruded on the present.

"Miss Dorcas," he began abruptly. "Why did you—"

She stretched out her hand appealingly.

"Don't bring in whys—now. We are so comfortable. I don't ask for an explanation—I don't want to give any. Can't you see I'm in Happy Valley for a little while? I am so glad to have you here again."

Merry smiled into her eyes. "I'll obey you, bless your gentle heart!"

The girl rose and reached to a shelf behind her for a box of cigars. Merry lit one, lounged back in a cushioned chair, and puffed rings of smoke towards the red fire. They sat in silence after Jason had carried away the dishes. Their quiet was broken when the clock struck one. The man started.

"Miss Dorcas, you wanted me here

to talk. I cannot let you go to a night's sleep."

"I am as wide awake as a cricket. I slept all the afternoon."

"First of all," Merry asked gravely, "how did you find me? Scores of men and women passed me day after day, people I have known for years. Not one of them recognized me."

"They were not searching for you."

"You were?"

Dorcas nodded.

"How did you find me?" he persisted.

"Last night on my way home from the theater with Mr. Oswald our cab stopped in a block, and it was opposite where—that line of men stood. I was looking at them when I saw you pull down your hat. When Mr. Oswald left me here I drove back to Tenth street, but the line had dispersed. I went again tonight—just hoping."

"Who is Mr. Oswald?" asked Merry abruptly.

"Don't you know? Haven't you been reading the papers? Mr. Oswald is the man who is putting on your play."

"My play?" Andrew dropped his half-smoked cigar on the table.

"Your play," repeated Dorcas in a quiet tone. "They have been searching everywhere for you to play 'John Esterbrook.' Enoch is in Montreal now, looking for you."

Merry laughed harshly.

The girl clasped her hands together.

"Mr. Merry, tell me, are you and Enoch no longer friends?"

Andrew picked up his cigar and puffed it until the red spark revived. Then he laughed again. "We are not exactly friends. Has he told you anything?"

"Yes, he told me—only it seemed so strange, so hard to believe after our talk that day at the point, that somehow I cannot understand it."

Merry watched her keenly. He was throttling a temptation to tell everything that had come between him and the sunshine of existence. He felt sure of the girl's sympathy; he knew



She Pointed to the Bold Headlines.

she would understand. He had begun to realize his own dependent nature. First there had been his mother, then for years he had leaned upon Enoch's strength and friendship. When he was left alone it was outer darkness. Every fiber of his being longed not so much for redress as for understanding and sympathy.

"Miss Dorcas, I will begin at the day when I left you and—"

Suddenly he realized he could not tell the story of Enoch's disloyalty to her. "Miss Dorcas, I need your help—terribly."

"I am ready to help you in any way I can," she answered quietly. She knew he was nervous himself to a confession, and she understood what an ordeal it was to the man. She crossed the room and laid a paper before him, pointing to the bold headlines stretched across the top of a page. The words fairly leaped at Merry.

TREMENDOUS SURPRISE
Enoch Wentworth the Coming Dramatist.

He read on down through the column. Fellow journalists had banded together to give Enoch a royal introduction.

Merry's name was not mentioned, though there was frequent reference to a famous star, who had the leading part in consideration. Oswald was referred to as a newcomer in the ranks of New York managers. His lavish production of Wentworth's drama was described in figures approaching prodigality. Merry read it through to the last sentence, then the paper fell to the floor and he buried his face in his hands.

While Dorcas watched her heart ached for him. He had to hold in check the soothing touch she would have given to a woman or to a child.

"Oh!" she said in a piteous whisper, "it was such a mistake."

He did not answer or lift his head from his hands.

"I pleaded with Enoch. I told him it was all wrong, terribly wrong, for him as well as for you; that when you returned he must set things straight. I told him it was not even collaboration; it was wholly and distinctly your play, yours alone—"

"Collaboration?" repeated Merry perplexedly, raising his eyes.

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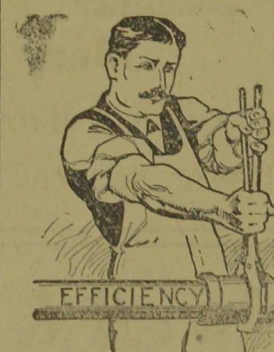
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