

The LAPSE of ENOCH WENTWORTH

By ISABEL GORDON CURTIS
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(Continued)

"If we didn't have to take into consideration the question of a woman to play her part, there's her consent. It is iron-bound for the whole season. There's nothing especially heroic about Miss Paget. Get her mad," Enoch laughed grimly, "and she'll give you trouble to burn."

"I'll look out for that myself. I'm responsible for her being here. Clean-minded citizens should not have to herd in with a—moral leper."

"That's scarcely a fit name for a lady."

Grant Oswald's voice was emphatic. "I never did class Miss Page with—ladies."

"I might as well tell you before you go in for anything of the sort that I will fight you legally. It would be the worst sort of business proposition to drop Miss Paget in the middle of a successful run. It is not fair to her. If an actress does the work you ask of her, she has the right to make any sort of domestic arrangement she pleases."

Wentworth's tone was conclusive. He lit his cigar again and stood silently beside his desk, blowing the smoke across the room in distinct rings. "You said you had several business matters to talk over. Is this everything for today?" He lifted his



Wentworth's Voice Was Fierce With Irritation.

hat from the rack as if anxious to end the interview.

Oswald spoke stiffly. "I hate to think of a quarrel with you, Wentworth. I'll confess I have not a great deal of fighting blood in me. We don't seem to get along as well as we did at first. I don't know whether it is your fault or mine." He paused as if waiting for Enoch to speak. Then he continued, "There was one other thing. I have been meaning to speak of it for some time. Probably others have mentioned it to you. The newspaper men are asking me one question all the time—they want to know if you are at work on another play?"

Enoch gave him a savage look. It was a look which puzzled Oswald all day long. "I will think of that when I get good and ready. The 'House of Esterbrook' is good for one season more—probably for two." Then he flung out of the office and slammed the door behind him.

Oswald sat in silence for a few minutes. His face was full of anxious perplexity. He rose, put on his hat and overcoat, and went out into the lobby he met Zilla Paget. She turned eagerly as if to speak to him. He lifted his hat with grave courtesy and walked past her. She followed to the door and watched him while he crossed the street.

Her face flamed scarlet and she bit her lips, then she laughed contemptuously and hurried through the dark theater to the stage. The place was deserted. She went straight to the letter-rack. In the shelf marked P she found several letters for herself. She was turning away when her eyes fell upon an envelope in the lower corner of the rack. She picked it out and stood for a moment staring at it blankly, then she gasped. The letter was not for her. It was addressed in coarse, shaky writing, "Mrs. Alice V. Bourne, Gotham Theater, New York."

It bore the Madison Square postmark. The word "eyes" were furtively searching the gloomy theater in all directions. She did not hear a sound; nobody was in sight. She slipped the letter into her muff and ran upstairs.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Green Turquoises.

"Then," continued Dorcas, "Gulesah lifted the lady to the horse's back and leaped up before her. She put her arms about his waist and clung to him tightly. Rise, horse, rise," he cried. The horse and all the hundreds of horses behind him spread out their wings and rose in the air. They went flying swiftly across the sea."

"Miss Dorcas," interrupted Robin incredulously, "I didn't know that horses could fly. I thought they trotted on the streets like this." The boy slipped down from his chair and kicked with his heels upon the floor.

"Gulesah's horse had wings—all fairy horses have wings," Dorcas laughed.

"Did you ever see a fairy horse?"

"I'm afraid I never did."

"Then how do you know that it's true?"

"Fairy stories tell us so."

"Oh," the child's brown eyes turned to her eagerly. They were interrupted by a knock at the library door. Jason entered.

"I reckon you're awfully busy dis afternoon, Missy?"

"Not if there is anything I can do for you, Jason."

"Emiline's downstairs. You know who Emiline is?" He paused and glanced at Robin.

Dorcas nodded.

"It wasn't no inconveniencin' she'd like to see you."

"Why does she want to see me, Jason?"

"I can't tell, Missy. She's dees keep a-pleadin' an a-pleadin' fo' you to see her, so I tol' her, I'd ask you."

"I'll see her. And, Robin, suppose you go with Jason for a little while. He keeps a doughnut jar in the pantry. Make Jason tell you a story. Flyin' horses are nothing to the wonderful things he has seen."

Emiline entered timidly and stood waiting until Dorcas pointed to a chair. She was a neat-looking yellow girl, but there was a worried look on her good-natured face.

"Anything wrong, Emiline?" asked Dorcas.

"Wrong! Eberly's wrong, Miss Wentworth. I've lef' Miss Paget fo' good on all. Lawd, what a whack she bit me when I tol' her somethin' I thought!"

"She struck you?" Dorcas stared at the girl in astonishment.

"Deed, Miss Wentworth, she struck me hard, straight 'cross my mouf wid her hand. I could take de law to her, I reckon, en git damages, but I ain't a-agin' to. Ise scared to death ob havin' anyting to do wid her." The girl's face seemed to wizen, and she clasped her hands in an agony of terror. "I wouldn't wuk fo' her nobow—I'd rather go on de streets. Miss Wentworth, 'er tuquoises an a-tur'nin' green!"

"What do you mean?"

Emiline spoke in a frightened whisper.

"Her tuquoises an a-tur'nin' green, I diff' yo' caw'd dey it."

Dorcas laughed. The octocorn's statement was so irrelevant it was almost funny.

"Lawdy, Miss Wentworth, don't go to laughin', I reckon you don't know what an awful ting dat is to happen. I nubber hear'n her tol' bout it when I was a little gal. Her Misses was an army lady, rich en beautiful ez could be, but she done hated her husband en der was anoder man she was sho' sot arter. Her husband, de fine ol' army man, he died sudden one night. She had er necklace on, de bluest tuquoises yo' ebber see, en de next day dey turned green. Den dey found out she'd poisoned him. Dey would have hung her, but she drowned herself. De tuquoises was on ob neck when dey pulled her out ob de ribber—dey was green as grass."

Dorcas shivered. "Emiline, what has this to do with Miss Paget?"

The girl's eyes grew round with terror.

"She had er necklace ob de swellest tuquoises giv her a month ago by a gemman. She's always gittin' presents fr'm gemmen. Dey was ez pale blue ez de sky when she got dem. She wears dem all de time, day and night. You see dem on her when she was actin'."

Dorcas nodded.

"She nebbet takes dem off. One day I tol' her dey wa'n't near ez blue ez dey used to be. She took dem to a jeweler man en hed dem cleaned. Hitt didn't do dem a mite ob good. Dis mornin'," Emiline paused as in terror of repeating it, "dis mornin', Miss Wentworth, ez sho' ez Gawd made me, dem tuquoises turned green!"

Dorcas sat staring at her.

"I screamed when I sot my eyes on dem." The girl's teeth chattered. "She asked what de matter, en I tol' her de story ob de ol' Colonel's Misses. Dat's when she whaled me 'cross de mouf."

"But," queried Dorcas with a puzzled frown, "what does it all mean?"

"Lawdy, dem tuquoises would have stayed sky-blue on 'o, Miss Wentworth, er on any lady dat wa'n't don't all dem kind ob wicked tings."

"Rubbish!"

"I swear to de Lawd hit's true," cried Emiline appealingly. "I've heard my granny tell hit many a time."

Dorcas laughed. Although the story was absurd, her skin had grown chilly while Emiline talked.

"I'll tell you." The girl's voice grew intense. "Don't yo' member she had dem tuquoises on las' night when yo' come in wid de little blind boy? Lawd, I could er choked her dead wid my own han's! She was de ol' devil hisself, en der's a judgment a-comin' on her. When yo' was gone, de tings she done say was curdin' to de blood!"

"Miss Paget is not a good woman I know, but—"

"Good!" interrupted Emiline. "She didn't murder nobody den, en I reckon she ain't since, but dar was murder in her heart! En den, dis mornin', 'fore she went out 'bout de tuquoises—somethin' queer happened, somethin' terrible queer!"

"What?"

"She come upstairs wid er bunch ob letters in her hand, right arter lunch time. She laid dem down; but befo' she done took off her tings she took anoder one out er her muff. 'Fo' she took her hat off she opened it en read it. She dropped de envelope de floor. I saw it. Hitt wa'n't addressed to her, hit was somebody else's letter.' The negro girl paused irresolutely for a moment.

"Well?" queried Dorcas.

"Hit was fo' Mrs. Alice V. Bourne, Gotham Theater."

"Alice V. Bourne?" Dorcas jumped to her feet.

"Yessum." Emiline's tongue ran on excitedly. "Miss Paget, she was took wid de queerest fit yo' ebber see arter she done read it. She lay back en screamed en laughed. She got clear hystericky. Den, all of er sudden, she started to fire questions at me 'bout little Julie Bourne en Mrs. Bourne, en where dey lived en where dey come fr'm. I didn't know nuffin' but where dey lived. I went up once to Harlem wid Mrs. Bourne, but she had er bring some stu' ob Miss Julie's to er."

"Where did she get the letter?" asked Dorcas.

"Yo' kin search me," answered Emiline briskly. "Dat 'oman 'ould steal er murder er any ob t'ing."

There was a long silence. Emiline rose to go.

"Miss Wentworth," she asked hesitatingly, "ef yo' hear ob er good place, would yo' send fo' me? Jason, he knows where to fin' me anytime." She paused irresolutely. "You don't want a nurse fo' de little blind boy, I reckon. Ise er born nurse. I like it!"

"I don't know yet, Emiline, what plans I can make, or what will be done with Robin; but I'll try to find some work for you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Irony of Fate.

Wentworth locked himself in the library one Saturday morning. Oswald, with quiet insistence, had continued the demand that he break away, go home, and begin work on another play. "Business," he carried along with him, "was his daily assurance."

"The House of Esterbrook" is good for another season, perhaps for more than one, and we ought to look ahead. I am asked every day if you are writing another play. You ought to strike while the iron is hot. The luck we are having should be an inspiration to you."

The Waverly Place house was perfectly still. Enoch seated himself before the desk, cleared off the blotter, laid out a heap of copy paper, filled the ink-well, and adjusted a new pen. He leaned his head upon his hand and

Dorcas had branded him as a thief. Still she had kept her word and never again questioned the authorship of the play. Her accusation left a welt in his soul like a stroke from the thin end of a whip. It was a welt which had not healed. He knew she had spoken the truth. He dropped his head upon his arms. It was years since he had said a prayer. He had forgotten the form that prayer takes. "God," he murmured, "if there is any way for me to come back—and begin again—show me that way."

He did not raise his head; in an apathy he was listening curiously to a commotion in the lower part of the house. From a wrangle of voices in his hall rose the clear tones of a woman. He jumped to his feet with consternation in his eyes and flung the door open. While he stood motionless listening his forehead wrinkled in perplexity. A cabman was carrying a trunk upstairs. It was so large that it blocked the stairway. A few steps below Jason tried in vain to pass.

"Yo' ain't got no right to tote dat trunk up dar without Marce Wentworth's say so," cried the old negro. "I'm gwine tell him 'bout hit."

When a woman's voice from the lower hall answered, Enoch's face went pale white.

"You dippy old black fool, I know my business. Cabby, take up that tank as I tell you to."

Wentworth could hear Jason expostulate again. "Marce Enoch don't know you're comin'. Missy Dorcas am out en she ain't gib me no orders 'bout comin'."

"Missy Dorcas!" repeated the woman with a contemptuous laugh. "Get this out of your noddle straight away: I'm not company Miss Dorcas is expecting. And here's a bit of advice, leave your doddlering old jaw, then announce me to your master."

Enoch, with a few quick steps, reached the top of the stair and leaned over the balusters. The cabman glanced at his stern face, then dropped the trunk from his shoulder and stepped it on the edge of a step.

"Stay right where you are," ordered Wentworth abruptly.

He turned to the woman, who stood on the stair. She lifted her face and greeted him with a derisive laugh.

"Will you be good enough, Miss Paget, to tell me what this intrusion means?"

The Englishwoman laughed again. It was a peculiar laugh, a sweet, shrill ripple, without a ghost of merriment in it. It had a thrill as of something demonic. She did not answer his question, but turned to the cabman.

"Take that trunk up and set it on de landing. I caw pass while you black the stair. Then go down and wait until I call you."

The man obeyed. The actress paused on the top step and looked down at Jason. "As for you," she looked at him with a sneering smile, "mind your own business now. I have announced myself to your master."

Wentworth stood with his hand upon the railing of the stair. His face was stern and there were hard lines about his mouth. He held the door of the library open.

"Come in here," he said. There was no cordiality in his welcome.

The actress brushed past him with a short, unpleasant laugh. Her manner was full of self-confidence. Wentworth realized that he had never seen her look more beautiful; still his pulses did not quicken by a beat. She wore a gown of strangely lurid blue which few women would have dared to affect. The harmony between the dead gold of her hair and a willow blue plume that swept down from her hat was almost startling. Her attitude was aggressive and a certain

feases a man, never pausing day or night, never dropping out or balking as we humans do when the brain goes numb. I wonder," Enoch looked back in his chair, "I wonder if it is too late to come back. It does not seem possible that a man could undergo a physical change in a few months while he is still hale and hearty. They say such a thing does come, though—quick as a cat, when your arteries harden, or something of that sort happens. I'm forty-two. A man ain't old at forty-two, and yet—I feel old today. I suppose," he stared steadily at the face of the little clock as if it were a human countenance, "I suppose this is part of the scheme they call retribution to her feet."

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sense of power lay behind her theatrical entrance. Enoch's face settled into a frown, although his eyes were full of scowling perplexity. He rapped the door shut and turned the key in the lock.

"Now," he demanded sharply, "be good enough to tell me what this means."

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?" The woman spoke with an enticing smile.

"No. I have no intention of asking you to stay so long."

Zilla Paget laughed and sank languidly into a chair beside the fireplace. "I would suggest that you sit down," she said suavely.

Enoch shook his head.

"You may get tired before I am through talking. It will take some time to discuss this affair."

"What affair?" Wentworth turned on her with quiet scorn. "Don't be

foolish enough to try blackmail. Anything like," he paused for a moment as if trying to find a suitable word, "like sentiment for instance—or call it what you wish—did a natural death one afternoon when I tried to explain things to you. The minute a woman lets herself go and shows the devil in her makeup at white heat, sentiment can die—die a very sudden death. Besides, I have nothing on my conscience. I treated you as generously as any man would have done under the circumstances."

Miss Paget threw back her head and laughed. "Sit down," she advised.

"This is a different affair entirely. Do not flatter yourself; there is not a ghost of sentiment in this."

Enoch walked to the mantel, leaned his elbow upon it, and stared down at her. "I'll give you exactly ten minutes to explain what you want. If it is about your child, I am quite as anxious to get him out of my house as you are."

"My child! I will relieve your mind on that point immediately. It is not my child I want. If your sister wants to play foster-mother, she is quite welcome to him. When I think of it," she began slowly to draw off her gloves, "Miss Wentworth has really done me a great favor."

"Oblige me to," Enoch's voice was full of cold indifference, "by getting down to business as quickly as possible. You must be gone before my sister comes in."

"Indeed!" The actress looked up into his face with an insolent smile. "Why should we hurry? I want to ask you a few questions. I understand you are writing a new play." She turned to glance at the letter in her hand.

"Is there a part in it for me?"

"I have not begun to place parts yet."

"Ah!" She watched him with calm scrutiny. "How is it coming along? Will it be as big a go as 'The House of Esterbrook'?"

"Is it any of your business?"

"Probably not; still, I am interested. I have been wondering," she spoke slowly, as if thinking aloud, "if it can possibly come up to the expectations of the public. A second play is often such a rotter."

"What in thunder are you driving at?" asked Enoch fiercely.

"She sprang to her feet and faced him. There was a malevolent sneer in her face.

"My opinion is that anything you could do would be a rotter."

"Why?"

Zilla Paget drew one hand from her muff and pulled out a few sheets of crumpled paper. She laid them on the table, smoothing them carefully with the blank side up. Suddenly she turned them over and placed both hands firmly on the paper.

Enoch took a few steps forward and peered down through his glasses. He gazed unsteadily and his finger gripped at the edge of the table. A purplish flush swept over his cheeks; then he became ghastly pale. His lips grew white. There were ghastly hollows about his eyes like the shadows which creep into a face after death. His mouth moved, but he did not utter a word, because his tongue touched dry lips.

"I knew you would understand," murmured the woman.

Wentworth's hands sprang at her wrists like the grip of a wild beast snatching at its prey.

"Don't!" entreated the actress. "You hurt terribly. You do not know how strong you are. Besides—you are foolish, horribly foolish. If you should tear this, it is nothing but Exhibit A. There are hundreds of sheets where it came from. And let me tell you—they are yours and you'll find them."

Wentworth unclenched her wrists, but his eyes were blazing with murderous fury. He turned with a quick gesture to the wall behind him. Against a rug of Oriental matting hung a collection of savage weapons. The woman watched him with cool

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"Don't!" entreated the actress. "You hurt terribly. You do not know how strong you are. Besides—you are foolish, horribly foolish. If you should tear this, it is nothing but Exhibit A. There are hundreds of sheets where it came from. And let me tell you—they are yours and you'll find them."

Wentworth unclenched her wrists, but his eyes were blazing with murderous fury. He turned with a quick gesture to the wall behind him. Against a rug of Oriental matting hung a collection of savage weapons. The woman watched him with cool

unconcern. He seemed to be searching rapidly with his eyes for something. He laid his hand upon a long thin dagger. Here and there its blade had rusted to blackness, but its edge was deadly keen. He jabbed the point of it into his blotting pad. It curled over lithely, as a Ferras does. Then he glanced at the woman beside the table. His eyes were glittering with the bloodthirsty passions of the primitive man.

Zilla Paget lifted a lorgnette which hung at her wrist by a jeweled chain. She clicked it open, raised it to her eyes—and laughed.

"I wonder," she murmured, "if you realize how ridiculous you look. You are too white-livered to do such a thing as that. Besides," she glanced about the sunlit room, "where could you hide the body?"

Enoch tossed the blade upon his desk and began to walk up and down the floor. He rolled his handkerchief into a hard ball and dabbed with it continually at his moist forehead. The woman sat perfectly still. She turned to fold the sheets of paper, then she laid one hand upon them and lay back gracefully in her chair.

Wentworth turned on her with a sudden question. "How much do you want for—Exhibit A and the rest of the evidence?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Have no intention of selling it."

"Then what's your price?" Enoch's question snapped like a pistol shot.

She looked up at him with a derisive smile.

"My price is ridiculously small, much less than it is worth. I am merely coming here—to live."

"You are coming here—to live? Here—in the house—with my sister?"

"Here—in the house—with your sister," she repeated mockingly. "Exactly. I have taken a fancy to this part of the city. It is rather attractive for New York. I think I shall enjoy the society of your—sister. You will not find me a troublesome guest. I can fit in happily to your home circle. Part of my luggage is there in the hall, you know. The rest is downstairs."

A wave of scarlet swept over Enoch's face.

"To think of Merry squaring up through—you. It's the most infernal scheme ever concocted."

"That's a badly bad guess of yours. Merry does not come into this at all."

"Where did you get these?" Enoch spoke fiercely and pointed to the sheets of paper that lay under her hand.

"It's rather an unusual story. Sit down and I'll tell it to you. If you are searching for