

The LAPSE of ENOCH WENTWORTH

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ILLUSTRATIONS by ELLSWORTH YOUNG

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(Continued)

"It is simply this. Mrs. Esterbrook is an utterly heartless woman. Dead to conscience as she is at the beginning, she comes out of her life's tragedy calloused beyond all redemption. It strikes a false note to have her repent 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 sudden 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 talking 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 another 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. She tells me she once got a hundred dollars a week in vaudeville as a toe dancer." Merry laughed. "A toe 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 immediately," 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 gentle, 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 hesitation. "What ever became of the man? Did he die?"

"Nobody knows." Merry's voice had a bitter tone in it. "Better for some people if he had died. This little Julie is a character for his child."

"Where is Volk?"

"I can't tell you. If he's alive he must be far down by this time. He was a wretched sot when I saw him last."

"By Jove! what an impetuous stage lover he did make! I saw him in a big production the first time I came to America, then in London. He was the handsomest man that ever stepped on the stage."

"A handsome piece of beef! Ten years ago he married one of the sweetest, most loyal women I ever knew. She was on the stage, but she never won much notice. Her work was so quiet and delicate that she appealed to the few. She was in a company with me for two seasons. How Volk made her suffer! The beast!"

"Is she alive?"

"I hadn't heard of the Volk for years. I was going home last night when a woman touched me on the arm. She was lame and looked ill. A little girl clinging to her. I did not know her. 'I'm Alice Volk,' she said. I put them in a cab and took them up to Harlem, to the best old woman in the world."

"Are they in want?" asked Oswald.

"They were starving, in rags and shreds. The child pulled at my heart strings. She isn't quite seven and small for her age, but the way she cares for the poor, crippled little mother—Andrew laid a gray wig



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

mean a great deal to her. It is now reaching out a hand to some one who is drowning."

"Alice Volk is different from any one I ever met. When little Julie ran out to speak to you, I followed her. The mother laid her hand on my arm, drew me back into the room, then she closed the door and kissed me. She did not say a word. Any other woman would have kissed me while I was saying 'Good-by' before you and Mrs. Billerwell had seen unexpected things that cannot help drawing me to her."

"Poor soul!" said Merry.

The conductor entered, shutting the door behind him with a crash. "Twenty-third street!" he called.

"Let us get off and have dinner somewhere," suggested the actor. "I want to talk to you—for hours."

CHAPTER XII.

A Prima Donna of the Past.

Dorcas and Merry paused for a moment before a flight of steps which led up to what had once been a fine private residence. Its exclusive days were past; it was becoming with a garish blaze of light to every passer-by. Through the open door came strains from the overture to "William Tell."

"What a queer place," said the girl. "You can't realize its quaintness until we are inside. The crowd that gathers here is as motley as any you find in New York."

Dorcas ran lightly up the steps. The safe, shabby and weather-beaten outdoors, was here replaced by the father and a pair of painted canvas attempted to create the illusion of sunlight fields. Against it rose a theatrical apple tree. A hundred electric lights blazed inside crimson apples on its widespread branches. Under it, a huddle of tables, people were eating voraciously. The place shrieked its antagonism to the civilized ceremony of feeding. Humanity dug its elbows into one another while it handled knives and forks, and screamed its conversation. The rooms reeked with a hundred odors of highly-seasoned food and tobacco smoke. It was a bewildering blend of light and smells and noise. Dorcas followed Merry through the labyrinth to a small table in a distant corner, hedged about with palms.

"I come here time and again," confessed Merry after they were seated. "I love the place; the crowd is so interesting. People let themselves loose in a coep like this; they enjoy life!"

"I should think they did," Dorcas laughed grimly.

Across the room a party of college lads were humming a ragtime song in utter inharmony to the orchestra's music. Corks were popping amid the rattle of dishes and silver while laughter in a hundred tones, and the language of all the old Latin races, were blended in the strange babel.

"It's a droll little world," said Merry. Dorcas pulled off her gloves and sat smoothing them between her fingers.

"I remember," Andrew gazed about him in a reminiscent mood, "one season I was tied up with a summer production, and it was horribly lonesome in New York. There was not a soul in our company I wanted to fraternize with."

"I should think they did," Dorcas laughed grimly.

The musician huddled themselves and their instruments closer together, indignantly as if it were part of every night's program. The pianist struck a few bars of some tinkling thing in a musical comedy, then the singer began to sway her huge body. There was no space for her feet to move. She sang to the accompaniment, but the physical effort made her wheeze. The orchestra dashed into a tripping chorus, and the enthusiastic guests waxed high. Cheers were intermingled with laughter and screams of derision.

"Oh!" cried Dorcas piteously. "oh! how can they do it?"

The singer sank in a chair exhausted, then she rose and pushed her way down the aisle with a piteous gaze. Perspiration was washing white streaks through the patches of rouge on her cheeks.

"Who is the woman?" she asked.

"Twenty-five years ago her name was famous in our profession. Her songs were famous. When she went to Genoa to fill an engagement the whole town turned out to meet her, the shops closed, and it was a public holiday. The people pelted her with flowers and screamed themselves hoarse in a welcome. She was the star of the Belle des Nations. She sang in Paris and London. She came here, grew sick and could not fill her engagements. A manager went back on her, she lost what money she had, friends deserted her, she came down to this."

"Oh, the poor soul!" Dorcas' voice was a whisper.

"Her's was an unusual case," said Merry. "She is only fifty-three now, so I've heard. It makes you realize into what a short bit of our lives fame is crowded—if fame comes to us. The stage is no profession, it is an arm, a pitiful arm. Unless one has a home and some one in it to cherish and love, the lonely days of old age are—Andrew laughed cheerlessly. "Well, I never think of them."

He stretched out his hand to intercept a boy who wandered between the tables with a tray full of crimson roses. He laid a bunch of them before Dorcas. She buried her face in the cool petals.

"Shall we go?" asked Merry.

As they pushed their way through the maze of crowded tables they passed a woman who sat dining alone. She wore an orange velvet gown, and a shabby lace scarf covered her naked shoulders. Dorcas paused for a moment, laid her hand upon the woman's arm, and spoke a few words in Italian. The singer looked up and put a grimy, ring-bedecked hand upon the girl's fingers. Merry stood watching them. The woman looked very old and faded under the white glare of the electricity, but her face grew eager and tremulous while she poured out her soul in her own language. Dorcas took one rose from the cluster in her arms and laid the rest of the fragrant blossoms beside the singer's plate.

"You'll forgive me for parting with your flowers?" she whispered as she rejoined Merry.

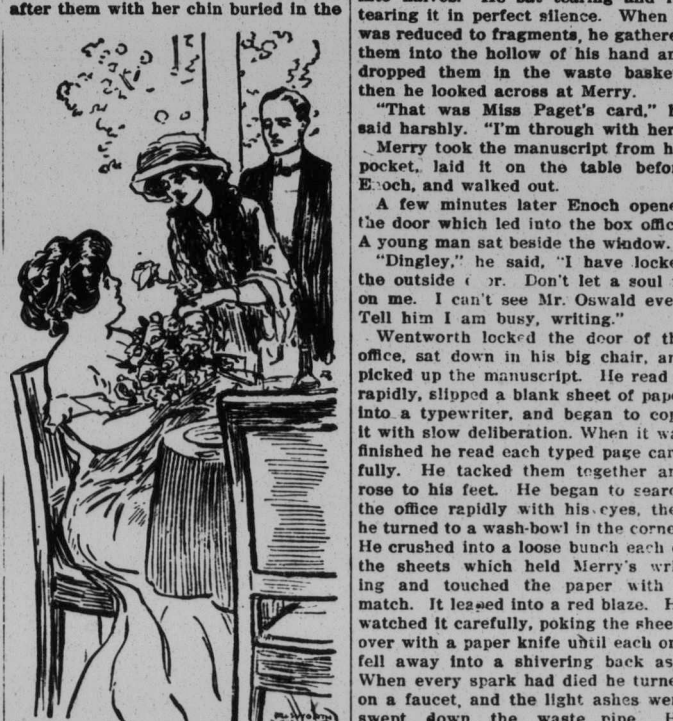
"I'm glad you did it. Once upon a time stage bouquets were worn as a sensation for that woman; today I



People Were Dining Voraciously.

guess she is showered with roses about once in a blue moon."

Dorcas paused near the door to nod good-bye to the singer, who sat gasping after them with her chin buried in the neck of her blouse.



Her Face Grew Eager and Tremulous.

red roses. Suddenly Dorcas turned to Merry. Her face had grown white, and she put her arm within his. He clasped it with a strong grip, but neither of them spoke. At the same moment they had caught sight of Enoch Wentworth. He was seated in an alcove at a small table hedged about with palms. Zilla Paget sat facing him. Enoch's hands clasped one of hers which lay upon the table. They were engrossed in each other.

Dorcas stopped abruptly when they reached the foot of the steps. "Oh!" she whispered appealingly. "Andrew, save Enoch from that woman!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A Sealed Bargain.

Wentworth sat in a small room at the theater, which he had appropriated as his own. It led directly off the box office. He was glancing over a heap of press clippings when the door opened and Merry walked in.

"Good morning!" There was a surprised glance on Enoch's face while he spoke.

Andrew nodded a response, then he drew a package of manuscript from his pocket. Wentworth's eyes turned on him curiously while he flattened it out on the table before him. No unnecessary courtesies passed between them. "I rewrote the scene as you suggested," said Andrew carelessly.

"That was good of you." In his surprise Wentworth showed an impulsive friendliness. He stretched out his hand for the manuscript.

"There was no cordiality in Merry's face. He glanced quietly through the written sheets.

"You count this change in the play a necessity?" he asked brusquely.

"I guess that's what it might be called," Wentworth's voice was impatient, and a frown chased across his face. "Oswald's been asking for it this morning. When a quiet fellow like him makes up his mind to have a thing, he's apt to be confoundedly insistent."

"Then you want it?"

"Certainly."

"I'll set up until daylight to write this. It's an improvement on the other act; I can see that myself. Oswald will tell you, I think, that it carries out his ideas exactly. Before I hand it over I want to make a dickler with you."

Wentworth stared at him blankly.

"A dickler?" he repeated. "Is it money?"

"Money!" Andrew's face grew harsh with scorn.

"What is it then?"

"I was dining last night at Colgate."

Wentworth's face grew suddenly scarlet, then it whitened.

"I saw you there," Merry's voice was relentless. "I don't know a blessed thing about the Paget woman, or for against her. I do know this, though: every man who has lived among good women knows she is not fit company for your sister for instance."

"Who said she was?" snarled Wentworth. "I had not thought of throwing her into my sister's society. Dorcas would not have tolerated even a passing acquaintance with her behind the scenes if I had my way."

"She is not fit to be seen with a decent man."

"You give me the credit then of being a decent man?" sneered Enoch.

"To a certain limit—I do."

"Well, what do you want?" Wentworth turned an apprehensive glance upon him, until daylight to write this.

"I want you to promise, before I turn over this manuscript, that you will have nothing to do with Zilla Paget except in a business way."

"Why, are you interested in her yourself?"

"My God, Enoch!" Andrew started the roll of paper in his pocket and jumped to his feet.

"Here, sit down. I want this affair straightened out—now."

Merry did not answer. He walked across the office and stood beside a table where a letter of photographs lay. He picked one up carefully and glanced at it. It was an exquisite portrait of Dorcas. Her eyes gazed into his with a straightforward look which was characteristic of the girl.

"Will you tell me," there was stern demand in Wentworth's voice, "will you explain why you are so concerned about my morals?"

"I don't care a damn about your morals," answered Merry contemptuously. "I was thinking about your sister. I am still fond enough to believe that you have some decency left. I will hand over this act, rewritten as you want it, when you promise to have nothing to do with Zilla Paget."

When Merry stopped speaking he took a seat opposite Enoch and waited for a reply.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Opening Night.

Dorcas stood motionless in the wings, with Merry beside her, leaning against a table. The curtain had fallen on the third act of "The House of Esterbrook." The girl's body throbbled from head to foot, and she felt as if the emotions of a lifetime had been crowded into that single hour. There was a babel of noise behind the scenes; in front the applause sounded like a tempest. At intervals the hand-claps died away as from weariness, only to begin again with tremendous vigor.

"Come," said Merry; "we must go out again."

"Again?" whispered the girl.

"Yes," Merry smiled; "this time the two of us alone."

"The two of us—alone." There was a low, tender thrill in Merry's voice. He took her hand and led her out upon the empty stage. The curtain was lifting slowly. From where she stood she saw Enoch standing in the wings. His face was flushed with excitement. The audience looked to the girl like a blur of color and human forms. The people swayed forward eagerly, and the applause became uproarious. A voice cried, "Speech! Speech!" It began to come insistently from the back of the house. The cry was taken up by men and women everywhere in the audience. Dorcas turned to Merry, Oswald was beckoning to him from the wings, but the actor shook his head.

"I could not make a speech tonight if my life depended on it," he whispered, and the curtain descended slowly.

A new cry came from the clamorous house. Some one was shouting for the author. Dorcas laid her hand upon Merry's arm.

"They want you," she cried.

He smiled and shook his head.

"She heard Oswald urge Enoch to go in front of the curtain. The noise in front grew louder. The girl flew across the stage and put her hand upon her brother's shoulder.

"Enoch," she pleaded in a whisper, "take Merry with you and explain."

Wentworth left her without a word. Oswald and the stage manager beckoned to him from the wings. She took a few flying steps as if to hold him back, then stopped. Merry had called her. She paused, staring into his eyes, with terror.

"Enoch must not go out there alone," she whispered in a low voice.

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"He must not do it. You should be with him. It is the last chance he has to make restitution. He will never, never do such a thing as this!"

"Listen," she heard Merry's whisper clearly through the din. "Dear, it does not matter. What does anything matter? The play is a success. You believe in me. I did it—for you. What do I care about the people out there? They are nothing to us."



A Look of Consuming Hatred Flitted Across His Face.

hind the scenes was listening and understanding except herself. His voice grew blurred as faces in the audience had been. She turned to glance at Merry. Once a look of consuming hatred flitted across his face, and his lips grew pallid as gray ashes.

Dorcas pulled away from his clasping hand and ran to her dressing-room. She was choking with sobs. She felt her fingers tingle where Andrew had touched them, and there was a look of terror in her eyes.

Merry stood waiting for her in the dressing-room. Little Julie jumped to her feet when Dorcas entered. The girl did not speak, but clasped the child to her bosom.

"Alice," she whispered, "help me to dress as soon as you can. And Julie, ask Dugald to get a carriage. I want to go home."

The woman kissed the girl's neck as she unbuttoned her gown. "It has been an awful strain. I know all about it—but Miss Dorcas, your future, is made."

The child returned in a minute. "Mr. Wentworth has a carriage ordered. Dugald says will you go with him?"

"No," cried Dorcas; "tell Dugald I'll be ready in ten minutes. I am going home alone."

Merry stood waiting at the stage entrance when she went out. He had heard Julie deliver the message. "Good night," said Merry, "Sleep well. Remember, everything is all right. I owe it to you, I owe you more than you understand. You made good tonight; the papers will tell you so in the morning. Good night. God bless you!"

"Good night." The girl shivered for a moment. It was intensely cold, and she drew a fur coat close to her chin. The cabman drove quickly, for the streets were emptied of vehicles. Along Broadway the theaters were dark.

John stood waiting to open the door when the girl ran up the steps. His dusky old face was one grin of delight. He had just returned from the theater and was growing impatient for the triumph of a homecoming.

(To Be Continued)

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