

The LAPSE of ENOCH WENTWORTH

By ISABEL GORDON CURTIS
Author of "The Woman from Wolverton"
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(Continued)



"Then He Must Be Found!"

"He won't do it," answered Wentworth.

He rose, put on his hat, and went out. Dorcas heard the front door slam behind him, then she laid her face on the arm of the sofa and burst into tears.

CHAPTER VII.

Merry Disappears.

Suddenly, as if the earth had swallowed him, Merry disappeared. A week passed. Grant Oswald, in a fever of enthusiasm, had begun preparations for a Broadway production. He turned a vast amount of responsibility over to Wentworth, who shouldered it thankfully. It kept at arm's length the possibility of dwelling much with his own thoughts: they were not cheerful company, and he was racked by constant anxiety about Merry. There was not a single moment to spare when he could go into the highways and byways of a great city to search, as he had searched before when the man was his friend. He could not delegate the task to another. He had prepared a tale for the public of Merry's whereabouts. Oswald believed the actor was studying his part and stood ready to appear at a moment's notice. Enoch went ahead with the tremendous load of detail that fell upon him, toiling day and night, while his mind alternated between terror and hope.

Every day the man was acquiring traits new to his nature. When a strange accident had tossed before him the possibility of satisfying his dearest ambition, conscience entreated loudly against the theft of another man's life-work. Every noble instinct in Enoch made its appeal; his honesty, his generosity, an innate demand for fair play, the love of his sister and friend, all cried aloud to him during the lonely hours of the night. There had been moments when he would have gladly retraced his steps, but the die had been cast. He was like a racer who, by some treacherous ruse, had pushed aside an opponent and was close to the goal. The intoxication of applause was beginning to sound in his ears, and the future held untold possibilities. It was too late to turn back; it would mean the downfall of great ambitions and bitter shame—it might even mean crime. It seemed easier to take the chances.

Occasionally Andrew's dogged face flashed back to his memory when he cried, "I will see what the law can do to protect a man from theft." Enoch felt his face blanch at the thought of it. Many a man had gone down and out for a crime less knavish than this. But he knew Andrew Merry well, and he trusted to one trait which was predominant in the future—the queer, exaggerated idea of honor.

Day by day his conscience quieted down, self-confidence took the place of wavering, and the fear of exposure seemed to recede. At last he could look the situation in the face without flinching. The task of putting on a theatrical production began to absorb him completely. He had always longed for such a chance; he had been storing away ideas he could now utilize, besides he knew New York thoroughly, and he had observed for years the system of producing a play. Oswald looked on with appreciation as Enoch put his plans into shape. He knew how uncommon was the combination of such talents in the same man—the ability to write a virile play, then to stage it with practical skill and artistic feeling and originality. A remarkably strong company was engaged. Oswald insisted on filling even the smallest parts with people far above the level of subordinate actors. The salary list grew to stupendous figures. One morning Wentworth remonstrated against paying one hundred dollars a week to an actor who was to play the janitor.

"Breen is a far bigger man than you need," he objected. "He has played leads to many of the biggest stars. We need a more bit of character work in this—he isn't on the stage half an hour. I can get a first-rate man for half that price."

"Breen can make the janitor so true to life that the audience will regret seeing him for only half an hour," Oswald rejoined. "That's the test of

quality. When I pay a hundred dollars I want a hundred-dollar man."

Before the middle of October all the parts were in rehearsal except two. An Englishwoman, Zilla Paget, was crossing the Atlantic to play "Mrs. Esterbrook." Oswald refused obstinately to give "Cordelia" to any actress that Wentworth suggested.

"We must close with somebody mighty quick," said Enoch, when Oswald had turned down Katherine Dean.

"Miss Dean is not even to be thought of," answered the Englishman decisively. "She's beautiful, but where's her feeling, her intelligence? I sat watching her face—the light fell strong upon her while you talked. There's absolutely nothing to her but beauty."

"She can act," insisted Wentworth. "I've seen her act. It isn't acting we want in 'Cordelia.' The woman who plays 'Cordelia' must have feeling, dignity, with a young face—not a face into which youth is painted."

"Cordelia must have beauty."

"We may get both. I am not searching for 'Cordelia' among the stars; I have hopes of finding her among the unknowns."

"That's a risky proposition," said Wentworth impatiently. "'Cordelia' is a big part. Why, it's almost leading business—it ought to be in rehearsal now."

"Wait a few days," suggested Oswald. "Now, tell me, when is Merry to show up? He should have been here a week ago. Can't you wire him today?"

"I'll do it right away," Wentworth tossed his hat on his head and left the office. He drew a long breath, when he stepped out on the sidewalk, and looked anxiously up and down Broadway as if hoping to see Merry approach with his nonchalant stride. He paused for a moment to light a cigar, then started at a brisk gallop down the street. He was accosted here and there by a friend. Each one offered congratulations. He was in no mood for that sort of thing. A block further ahead he saw Phillips of the Herald in the moving throng. There could be no escaping him. He jumped on a downtown car, and a few minutes later he was at the Battery.

He stepped off and crossed the square. The tide was coming in and a stiff breeze blew off the ocean. He seated himself on a bench and watched the spray dash over the pier. Throngs came and went, but Enoch did not see them. His mind was centered desperately upon one anxiety: Merry must be found. He had felt so certain that the actor might appear at any moment that he had allowed Oswald to think he knew where he was. He reported him half-sick, trying to recuperate, and hating the worry of a lawsuit with an angry manager, while Oswald was trying to settle out of court. He assured him that the comedian was letter perfect in his part; all he needed was to appear at late rehearsals. The strain, however, was telling on Wentworth. He had grown nervous and irritable. Oswald saw traces of it, but laid it to anxiety over the preparations for his play.

Dorcas realized the change in her brother and felt it keenly. She contrasted the care-free, generous, gay Enoch as he had been a month ago, with the man who had aged suddenly, who was growing morose, fretful, uncommunicative, and impatient over trifles. Day after day she saw less of him. His plea was hard work, so the girl was left to her own devices. She had few friends in the city. She



His Eyes Met the Gaze of His Sister.

spent the fall days in long, solitary walks, and her mind dwelt constantly on Merry. Her brother scarcely mentioned the play to her. She read news of it in the papers. Through them came the information that Enoch had relinquished journalism and was working on the production of a new play by a new author. She drew a long breath of relief over that announcement. She felt sure Enoch would do full justice to Merry when the time arrived. She was too proud to ask questions. Her brother had always taken her completely into his confidence; she was certain he would do so again when the toll and worry were over.

Wentworth watched her closely. He

realized how she had been changed—change of feeling; her every glance told it. He wondered frequently what the thoughts were that she did not put into words. In every woman he had admired for beauty, intellectual or heart qualities there had been some petty deceit or frivolity which, man like, he accounted a typical feminine vice. Dorcas was different. Sometimes she fancied it might be caused by her seclusion from the world during girlhood. Then he remembered a few of her girl friends he had met. It counted that there had been some petty deceit or frivolity which, man like, he accounted a typical feminine vice. Dorcas was different in heart and intellect. She resembled stalwart men he had known.

He sat with his eyes fixed on an ocean steamer, watching it majestically up the harbor. When her whistle shrieked in response to a salute, Wentworth rose with a start and glanced sharply at him. He felt that some one was watching him. His eyes met the gaze of his sister. She sat on a nearby bench staring at him, a newspaper in her lap and her hands clasped listlessly over it.

"Why, Dorcy! How long have you been here? Did you call me?"

"I did not speak to you," she answered quietly. "When I laid down my paper a minute ago you sat there."

He did not offer to take a place beside her, though she moved to make room for him. His face flushed hot when his glance fell on the headlines of a paper that lay in Dorcas' lap.

"Have you seen the story about yourself in the Times?"

"Of course I have," answered Enoch impatiently. "It was not my doing. Oswald insisted on it. Every paper is clamoring for news. We reproduce the play the first week of December."

"The paper speaks of you alone. Merry isn't given credit for even suggesting the plot. His name is not mentioned."

Wentworth's brow wrinkled into an ugly scowl. "How could he be mentioned? He can't be found—anywhere."

"Mr. Oswald said yesterday he was in the Catskills, ready to come on at a moment's notice."

"I wish to God he were!" cried Wentworth desperately.

"Why don't you tell Mr. Oswald the truth?"

"Dorcas, you're a chump. You don't understand that I am up against a harder proposition than I can meet."

"It seems to me, Enoch," said the girl slowly, "if you had not—"

She did not finish the sentence. She had turned her eyes away from her brother and stared at the multitude of craft in the bay, jostling each other as vehicles do on Broadway.

"Had not what?" he insisted.

She met his eyes calmly and they wavered before her own. "I mean if you had not made a false start—if you had gone into this honestly—everything would have come out happily."

Wentworth did not answer.

"I can't feel, Enoch, that Merry has had fair play."

The man stamped his foot impatiently.

"Help me to find him, then. Things will straighten out. Come, let us walk home. It's too chilly for you to sit here."

Dorcas rose and folded the paper which lay on her lap. She kept up with her brother's long strides through the crowd that thronged Broadway. A few minutes' silence he asked suddenly: "How did you happen to see Mr. Oswald yesterday?"

"He called at the house."

"About what?"

"On business. He has asked me to play 'Cordelia.'"

"It might have occurred to him to consult me!"

Wentworth stopped for a second. Dorcas was not looking at him—her eyes were turned straight ahead on the bustling street.

"Why didn't he speak to me first?" he persisted.

"I don't know. I can't decide what to do. I would say 'yes' if I could talk it over with Andrew Merry."

"I have told you point-blank you are not to go on the stage."

Dorcas spoke quietly. "You remember, I told you it was the only work I ever cared to do."

"When did Oswald suggest this?"

"Several weeks ago. He has talked with me about it more than once."

"He might have taken me into his confidence," snarled Wentworth.

"He knew how you felt about it. Besides, Enoch, the girl's voice trembled, 'besides—later I have not known whether you cared anything about my affairs.'

Wentworth did not answer until they turned into the quieter region of Waverly place.

"Don't sit in judgment on me, Dorcy," he pleaded. "When the trolley gets swung back on its pole and things begin to run without constant switching, I'll return to the old routine. Have a little faith in me. I have nobody in the world except you."

Dorcas flung away the paper which she was carrying and tucked one hand into her brother's arm.

"It's a bargain!" he asked, looking down at her with a smile.

"It's a bargain," she answered.

"About 'Cordelia,' Dorcy, do as you please. I cut loose when father planned my future, and did what I wanted to. A girl, I suppose, has the same rights, especially if she's a girl who can be trusted—implicitly."

When he unlocked the door, Dorcas passed in before him. As he shut it behind him she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. Wentworth held her for a moment in a close, affectionate grasp. On the hall table lay a note addressed to Dorcas, also a telegram for Wentworth. He tore it open and stood for a minute deep in thought.

"Enoch, I have an invitation here from Mr. Oswald to see Nazimova to-night. Do you mind it?"

"No. Give Oswald a message from me. I shan't have time to see him before I leave."

"Leave for where?"

"For Montreal. I put a detective on Merry's track. He has almost laid his hand on him. Tell Oswald I will bring Merry back with me in two days at the latest."

"Oh," cried Dorcas radiantly, "then

everything will be righted!"

"Everything will be righted," repeated her brother.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Bread Line.

"Miss Wentworth, what does 'Hilda' in 'The Master Builder' mean to you?" asked Grant Oswald during the first full of quiet they met after leaving the theater. Their cab had been held up in a Broadway blockade and the street became suddenly still. "She means something. Ibsen, first, last, and all the time, deals in parables. Six people whom I know, intelligent people, have six different interpretations of 'Hilda.' I am curious to know what she stands for to you."

Dorcas turned her candid gray eyes to his.

"I see only one thing—conscience. She appears when the 'Master Builder,' by one cruel, unjust, selfish action, is bound to go down to the depths. Nothing can save him but his conscience. 'Hilda' is his conscience, of course."

"That is my interpretation exactly. It is a wonderful play!"

"It is a wonderful play," she pointed to a crowd on the sidewalk. "What is that string of men?" she asked. "Their cab had been moving step by step for half a block. Again it came to a standstill."

"It's the bread line. Had you never seen it before?"

"No. Who are the men?"

"God knows!" answered the Englishman, with a thrill of compassion in his voice. "They are a lot of half-frozen, starving, human wreckage, who have been waiting there for an hour to get a loaf of bread."

Dorcas lowered the carriage window and gazed out. Oswald watched her. The girl's face mirrored her feelings so keenly he could feel what was passing in her mind. Her lips quivered and tears hung on her lashes. She could not trust herself to speak.

"I shall never forget how that pitiful line appealed to me the first time I saw it," the man continued, "although I had known the poor of London since boyhood. This homeless, famished, orderly column, growing and growing as one man after another comes creeping from his burrow to hold a place, was too much for me. I stood watching it from that corner," he pointed across the street, "night after night. I used to try to help. In a few cases I did manage to get a man on his feet. The task was generally hopeless, except that I could satisfy the hunger of the moment. During hard winters in New York I have seen the line grow till there were hundreds in it. Sometimes it goes down Tenth street and around the corner."

Dorcas turned to look at him. Tears stood in her eyes and her lips quivered.

"I understand," he went on. "You are wondering why we, well clothed, fed and sheltered from the wind, are here, and they are—there. I do not know. It is a problem as old as the world itself. All we can do is to help individually, man to man."

Dorcas' gaze went back to the bread line. Oswald sat in thoughtful silence.

"Don't think me sacrilegious, Mr. Oswald," she confessed, "but when I see such misery it makes me wonder if the Eternal himself has a conscience. She sat watching the line of patient, pallid men. Stragglers crept up to join it from every direction. 'I simply cannot imagine a God who—Mr. Oswald!' She grasped his arm with a half-stifled scream and laid her trembling hand upon his.

"What is it?" asked her companion, rising. "What frightened you, Miss Wentworth?" He stared past her out into the street. The block of vehicles had begun to move. They were again driving slowly down Broadway.

"Nothing," she answered quickly. "Nothing but a chance resemblance. I thought I saw some one whom I once knew. It must have been a mistake."

The Englishman glanced at her curiously. She began to chat about the play and other things. She was trying to forget whatever had startled her. She said "Good-by" at the door of her home. Oswald realized that she was eager to have him go. As he drove away he tried to recall anything which could have happened. A woman of her poise would not be disturbed by a trifle.

Dorcas shut the street door and ran upstairs to her brother's study, where the phone stood. She searched distractedly through the directory for the address of a livery from which occasionally she called a cab. The name had escaped her. She stood for a moment trying in vain to recall it, then she rang the bell. Her wait seemed

endless before the old servant appeared.

"Jason," she cried impatiently, "who

is Mr. Wentworth's livery man?"

"Costello, missy."

"Stay here a minute," she said as she paused for central answer. Then she stooped to the phone.

"Send a cab, please, to 26 Waverly place, immediately."

She turned again to the old servant.

"Jason," she asked, "you have waited on Mr. Merry when Enoch brought him here—sick—haven't you?"

"Deed I has, missy. Many's de time Mars Enoch an' I's done all sorts ob waitin' on him, when he's done been sick, perfectly miserable, missy. Yo'-all don't know how miserable."

"Can you help tonight? I may bring Mr. Merry back with me—miserable."

"Deed I can," cried the old man, with eager sympathy. "Yo' des leeb him to me. Lawdy! I tink ez much ob Mars Andrew nos' as I do ob yo'-all. He's been mighty good to me."

"Thank you," said Dorcas gratefully. "I am not sure whether he will come, but in case he does, be ready for him. He may want a hot bath and supper. Have a cheerful fire; it is bitterly cold outside."

She turned and ran downstairs when she heard the rattle of wheels on the street below.

"Don't yo' want me to go wid yo' missy?" suggested Jason. "Hil's pow'er! late fo' a lady to be goin' roun' New York alone."

"No; I would rather have you here waiting for our return."

Tenth and Broadway," she directed, as the cabman started. He pulled up at her signal opposite the bakery. The place was closed, the bread line had dispersed, and the quiet gray of early morning had begun to creep over the street. Occasionally a cab dashed past or a trolley went on its clamorous way, but there were few stragglers to be seen. Here and there a man on foot walked briskly, as if a shelter waited him somewhere. On the sidewalk stood a tall policeman. Dorcas studied his face for a moment, then she beckoned him. He came instantly to the cab window.

"Is this your beat every night?"

"Every night this week," said the man in blue.

"The men in the bread line have dispersed. Do you know where they go?"

"Where they go, lady?" The policeman smiled. "I couldn't tell you no more where they go than if they were rabbits scurrying to their holes."

Dorcas shivered. "Are they absolutely homeless—on such a night as this?"

"A good share of them are." The man spoke with little interest. The misery in the streets of New York was an old story to him.

"Do the same men come to the line night after night?"

"A man has to be mighty hungry when he stands an hour or two waiting for a hunk of bread. If his luck turns he'd have to go. Still, I've seen the same faces there every night for a month. Are you a settlement lady?" he asked respectfully.

"No." The girl's face flushed. "I thought tonight when we were passing that I saw some one in the bread line I knew, somebody we can't find."

"That happens many a time."

"Do you think Dorcas asked eagerly, "there would be any chance of his being here tomorrow night?"

"The likeliest chance in the world. If a man's willful with hunger—and you'd think some of them were willful the way they eat—there's a heap of comfort in even a mouthful of bread and a cup of coffee."

"If I should come tomorrow night—"

"I'll give you any help you want," said the officer kindly, as Dorcas hesitated.

"I don't believe I'll want help. The only thing is—I wish to do it as quietly as possible. It is altogether a family affair."

"I understand. You'll find me here."

"Thank you. Good night," said Dorcas gratefully.

"I didn't bring Mr. Merry tonight, Jason," she said, when the old servant opened the door for her. "but tomorrow night I think he will come."

The following day seemed to Dorcas the longest she had ever lived through. The weather was crisp and cold. She went for a long walk, treading for the first time a tangle of streets in the vicinity of the docks. It was a part of the city which belongs to the very poor. She searched everywhere for one figure. Poverty, famine, and homelessness seemed to create a family resemblance among men, women, and children. Still—she found nowhere the man for whom she looked. When she reached home at noon she felt tired physically and morally. She had spent an almost sleepless night. As she dropped off in a drowse she dreamed of finding Merry, of bringing him back to the world where he belonged, of setting his feet towards fame, happiness, and an honorable home.

Not a thought of love—the love of a woman for a man—stirred in her heart. She had forgotten her brother's question. There was something singularly childlike about Merry. His magnetism was blended a strain, dash of childish dependence which few men ever lose. It had appealed to the maternal instinct in Dorcas the first time they met.

From morning till night she waited anxiously for news from her brother but none came. She realized that he was on the wrong clue, but he had left no address, and Dorcas could merely wait. After her wait she lay down to rest on the library couch. A few minutes later she was sleeping peacefully as a child. When Jason came in he closed the shutters noiselessly and covered her with an afghan. The city lights were ablaze when she awoke. She waited impatiently for the hours to pass. The policeman had told her it was of no use to come to his corner until eleven or later; it was past midnight when the bread was dispensed. The clock struck eleven when a carriage Dorcas had ordered stopped at the door. Jason hovered anxiously about her.

"You mus' put on yo' big fur coat, missy, please." He was trying constantly to manage her as he had done when she was a little girl.

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"Jason, I don't need it; I'm perfectly warm."

He paused before pulling the glare of Broadway and pulled the hat brim carefully about his face; it might have been for shelter from the stinging blasts of sleet or for better concealment. Then he seemed to gather himself together with energy born of despair. He stepped quickly forward and took his place at the end of the bread line. A hungry crowd stood between him and the beneficence of food. Others were closer in behind him. Har-

"Yo' do, Breen ez yo' brother," missy," he pleaded anxiously. "Hil's grown bitter col' fo' November. Yo'-all 'll freeze ez yo' do."

"All right," laughed the girl, and she slipped her arms into the wide sleeves. "Just to please you, Jason—remember that—not because I'm cold. Now," she added, "don't get nervous if it is an hour or two before I return. I shall be quite safe. Mr. Merry will come back with me tonight, I know. Have everything as cozy and cheerful as possible. And—Jason—I've got my key. I'll ring when you want you. Don't bother about opening the door. The girl's intuition told her that Merry might have fallen to such low estate that it would be for even a old servant to see him. The negro understood."

"I know, missy. I'll do ez yo' say—but fo' de Lawd sake do take care ob yo'self. What could I say to Mars Enoch if anything happened to missy?"

"Nothing's going to happen, good old Jason," cried the girl, as she ran down the steps.

The officer was waiting at the corner. He beckoned the cabman to pull up where an electric light would not shine into the carriage, then he stopped for a minute at the window.

"I'll stay near by and keep my eye on you. When you see your party, signal me. I'll give your caddy the order, and he can drive around a block or two and take you up Tenth street. Then slip out and get your—your friend that way. There ain't no

and there one man turned to speak to another; the man Dorcas was watching stood immovable. He thrust his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, his eyes fixed on the white-washed sidewalk beside him. Dorcas turned to the opposite window and nodded with an eager gesture to the officer. His hand went up. He spoke to the cabman in a low voice.

"Drive round through University place to Tenth—the up toward Broadway. Pull up half-way down the block."

The man turned his horse and moved down the street.

CHAPTER IX.

A Man of Honor.

Dorcas breathed a sigh of relief when her cab drew up beside the bread line. She had thought during her brief drive around the block of the possibility that the man might leave his place; but there he stood, motionless, with head bent defiantly against the stinging eddies of sleet. She stepped from the carriage and passed swiftly along the sidewalk beside the line of a city's poor. She hesitated for a few seconds when she reached the corner, then she stretched out her hand and laid it on the wet sleeve of the man before her. He turned and stared at her for one dazed moment. He did not speak. Instinctive courtesy reminded him that this was no place for a woman in a midnight storm, and his desire to protect her caused the hunger to be forgotten. He stepped quickly from the sidewalk and without a word moved beside her down the street. The movement caused a score of men to turn with quick curiosity, but suddenly a cry ran down the line: "The door's open!" Everything else yielded to the march toward food.

Dorcas happily led the way to the carriage. When she opened the door and beckoned Merry to enter he hesitated, the blood flushing into his wan face.

"What do you want, Miss Dorcas?" he asked quietly.

"I want to talk with you," answered the girl. "Do go in, please—out of the storm."

Merry handed her in, then followed and shut the door. "I cannot go home with you," he announced stubbornly.

"Enoch is away. He's in Montreal, and there is nobody at home except Jason and me. I have a message 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."