

# The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

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SYNOPSIS.

Enoch Wentworth, newspaper man, and Andrew Merry, actor, play a hand at poker, the stakes absolute control of the future of the loser. Wentworth wins and they decide to keep the matter secret. Enoch's sister, Dorcas, knowing from her brother of Merry's shortcomings, tries to arouse his ambition. Andrew outlines the plot of a play he has had in mind and she urges him to go to work on it. When the play is completed Merry reads it to Wentworth, whose life ambition is to write a successful play. He demands Merry's play as a forfeit of the bond won in the poker game. Preparations for staging the play are begun, but Merry, who is to play the leading part, is missing. Dorcas is asked to play the leading female part and makes a fine impression at the rehearsals. She quarrels with her brother for taking all the credit for the piece. Dorcas finds Merry among the down-and-outs in a bread line. She influences him to take his part in the play. She produces and suggests certain changes in the play to Enoch, which the latter tries to induce Merry to make, but the actor refuses.

## CHAPTER XI—Continued.

"You're right." Oswald's voice was emphatic. "I don't know why I did not see it. Perhaps because the child has little to do except to follow her father about."

"It's that following the father about which I mean to make the strongest point in the first act."

"Engage the child immediately."

"I'll have to do diplomatic work to get her."

"How?"

"Alice Volk would rather starve than let her child go on the stage. She has been hoping we might find a small part for herself which she could play—crippled."

"Poor soul."

"I hinted that we might give the little Julie a chance. She snatched the child away as if she thought I meant to kidnap her. When a woman has seen the seamy side of life as she has—

—you understand."

Oswald nodded gravely. "We must find a way to get around her."

Merry sat writing a letter in the manager's office the next afternoon when Oswald entered, accompanied by Dorcas.

"I want you to tell Miss Wentworth about the little Volk girl," said the Englishman. "I have enlisted her sympathy. If the mother felt that some woman here would be interested in the child she might change her mind."

"I'll do anything I can," said Dorcas heartily. "I am glad you are making a change. It will improve the first act wonderfully to have the child sweet and real. Then," the girl laughed in a half-embarrassed way, "did you ever look at a picture of yourself when you were at the tadpole age and wonder if it could have possibly been you? That has been my frame of mind since I laid eyes on the little 'Cordelia.'"

"I don't blame you," Oswald smiled. "I can't imagine why we made such a blunder. Merry puts it just the way you do."

"Thank you, Mr. Merry," Dorcas turned to the actor with a grateful smile. "I am ready to go with you any time to see Mrs. Volk."

Dorcas had a new insight in Merry's character when she found how his friends held him in esteem. There was not a touch, in Mrs. Billerwell's greeting, of hero worship or deference to the man who had won fame. It was merely a droll blend of loving devotion and motherly tyranny.

Merry jumped to his feet when Mrs. Volk entered, with Julie clinging shyly to her gown. Dorcas felt instantly a throb of sympathy and warm friendship. Merry had told her something of the pitiful story on the way uptown.

"You said once, Miss Dorcas," he reminded her, "that you were never so happy as when you had some one to mother. Alice Volk needs mothering. I doubt if she has a friend in the world except Mother Billerwell and myself. Mrs. Billerwell is pure gold, but Alice needs a woman like you."

Half an hour later they waited on the platform of an L. station for a downtown train. They had scarcely spoken since leaving the Harlem house. Merry realized how deeply the girl's heart had been stirred. They entered the train and took a seat together in silence. She sat gazing at the city below. Then she turned suddenly.

"Little Julie is to begin rehearsal tomorrow morning," she said. "The

mother made only one condition: they are to be known under another name. She is in terror lest her husband finds them."

"That's all right, but do you think the child can play the small 'Cordelia'?" asked Merry anxiously.

"You can do anything you wish with that child. She has a soul and sweetness, and she understands. There is something in her—we call it magnetism in older people—which will reach across the footlights and grip every man and woman in the audience. The child will help me wonderfully. Now I won't have to create a new 'Cordelia' when I come on the stage. My 'Cordelia' is simply the little girl grown older and wiser, with more love for her father and a larger knowledge of life."

"You understand perfectly."

"You and I ought to understand 'Cordelia' if any one could."

Dorcas sat in silence while they rushed over the lighted city with its insistent glimpses of sordid life. Merry saw her chin tremble once and her eyes grow misty; then she spoke suddenly: "She must have lived through awful experiences."

"Alice Volk has seen the very depths. She suffered more than misery and neglect; there was actual brutality. I knew her before Volk came into her life. She played with the first New York company I was in. She was the gayest little creature then you can imagine—a whimsical, laughing, carefree, happy child."

"Gay!" Dorcas spoke incredulously. "The gaiety has gone."

"It has been wrung out of her."

"I never had a real woman friend except the sisters at the convent," said Dorcas. "I think Alice Volk and I will be friends. We can help each other."

"Each other? I had not thought of it in that way. Your friendship will mean a great deal to her. It is like 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. She does unexpected things that cannot help drawing one to her."

"Pour 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 beckoning 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 queerness 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 cafe, shabby and weather-beaten outdoors, was bizarre inside. At the farther end a daub of painted canvas attempted to create the illusion of sunlit fields. Against it rose a theatrical apple tree. A hundred electric lights blazed inside crimson apples on its widespread branches. Under it, at a huddle of tables, people were dining vociferously. 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 coop like this; they enjoy life frankly."

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

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 languages 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. Enoch was West. I used to

come here night after night and work myself into a light-hearted mood. I had a part I hated. I did not go on until the second act, so sometimes I stayed here until half-past seven. The place waked me up. I got into a queer humor while watching people. Before it wore off I used to dash to the theater, as one acts when you are overpowered with sleep, and try to get to bed before you go wide awake again. Usually I don't have to hammer myself into the disposition for work. When I am cast for some role that makes one fairly snort with impatience, it is horribly hard to feel like it. If I get a human character, I love it."

"Like 'John Esterbrook'?"

"Yes, like 'John Esterbrook.' Miss Dorcas," Merry went on eagerly, "I went tramping yesterday—alone. I found myself within sight of another state before I pulled up. I was—heaven knows how many miles from anywhere. I thrashed things out with myself. I'm going to make 'John Esterbrook' the biggest thing that has struck New York in years."

Dorcas laughed. She felt foolishly happy.

"I am so glad," she said. "It's up to me to do the best I can; I owe it to you," there was grim determination in Merry's voice; "to you and Oswald, he's a prince of a good fellow; now Alice Volk and the child come into it."

"And yourself."

"Yes, myself. If I succeed, it means retrieving more than you imagine."

"And you will confess you wrote the play?"

"Not—yet."

"Why?"

"Miss Dorcas," Merry's voice had a tone of entreaty in it, "I want to ask one thing of you. I ask it because your faith in me is so great and uplifting. Drop the authorship of the play. I cannot explain. I cannot fight the thoughts you have of me. You said once, 'I believe in you.' Do you remember?"

Dorcas looked at him with steadfast eyes and nodded.

"Go on believing. It's the kindest thing you can do for me, and—for Enoch."

Their eyes made a compact though no word was spoken.

They lingered over strange dishes that came and went. Food seemed merely a circumstance, an excuse for being alone and together. They felt curiously isolated, for the noise made a retreat for them as silence does. A sudden hush fell on the babel of sound. The orchestra, which had rested for a few minutes, began again—not one of its long overtures, but a prelude to the florid music in an Italian opera. Through the murky atmosphere a woman's voice shrilled out with rare sweetness.

Dorcas rose to her feet for a second, searching for the singer; then she seated herself with her back to the table. The crash of dishes, the rattle of silver, and the popping of corks continued, but tongues were stilled except for one voice. It was singing the tremendous aria from "Ernani." The girl drew a long breath as the last note died away into silence then she turned eagerly to Merry.

"Who is she?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

She turned again to look at the singer, who stood crushed into a narrow balcony which was crowded to discomfort by a piano and four musicians. The woman was absurdly fat and absurdly gowned. Years ago, in the palm days of a concert tour, she had swept upon the platform in a robe of burnt orange velvet splashed gorgeously with silver lace and scintillating embroidery. It had seen years of service, then grown tawdry, unfashionable, soiled, and grotesquely queer. It reminded Dorcas of the stately door in its last stage of shabbiness. The woman's straw-colored hair was gathered into a ridiculous pompadour. Across the dining room, through murky waves of tobacco smoke the girl could see careworn wrinkles about the woman's eyes. The vivid scarlet of her cheeks was pitifully false, false as the whiteness of her vast, bare shoulders. Again she began to sing, something which came thrilling from the wonderful throat with perfect coloratura. She threw back her head and tilted her face till Dorcas saw only the profile. For one moment the gross lines disappeared; instead came a glimpse of beauty and picturesqueness, a dignity which belonged to the days of youth and power, the royal days of a singer.

The room rang with an encore, then came a shriek of command. "Dance!" shouted the group of students in a corner.

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

The musicians huddled themselves and their instruments closer together, indifferently 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 enthusiasm of the guests waxed high. Cheers were intermingled with laughter and screams of derision.

"Oh!" cried Dorcas, "oh! the shame of it!"

The singer sank in a chair exhausted, then she rose and pushed her way down from the balcony. Dorcas watched her with a pitiful 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 from one end of Italy to the other. 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 Bellini in Naples. 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 has-beens in our profession are an army, a pitiful army. 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-bedizened 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 a worn-out sensation for that woman; today I guess she is showered with roses about once in a blue moon."

Dorcas paused near the door to nod good-by to the singer, who sat gazing after them with her chin buried in the 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 can't 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 sat 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 dicker with you."

Wentworth stared at him blankly. "A dicker?" he repeated. "Is it money?"

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

"What is it then?"

"I was dining last night at Colgas's. I—"

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, for or 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 to tolerate 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.

"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 stuffed 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 litter of photographs lay. He picked one up carelessly 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 fool 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.

A visiting card lay on the table. Wentworth picked it up and tore it into halves. He sat tearing and re-tearing it in perfect silence. When it was reduced to fragments, he gathered them into the hollow of his hand and dropped them in the waste basket; then he looked across at Merry.

"That was Miss Paget's card," he said harshly. "I'm through with her."

Merry took the manuscript from his pocket, laid it on the table before Enoch, and walked out.

A few minutes later Enoch opened the door which led into the box office. A young man sat beside the window.

"Dingley," he said, "I have locked the outside door. Don't let a soul in on me. I can't see Mr. Oswald even. Tell him I am busy, writing."

Wentworth locked the door of the office, sat down in his big chair, and picked up the manuscript. He read it rapidly, slipped a blank sheet of paper into a typewriter, and began to copy it with slow deliberation. When it was finished he read each typed page carefully. He tacked them together and rose to his feet. He began to search the office rapidly with his eyes, then he turned to a wash-bowl in the corner. He crushed into a loose bunch each of the sheets which held Merry's writing and touched the paper with a match. It leaped into a red blaze. He watched it carefully, poking the sheets over with a paper knife until each one fell away into a shivering black ash. When every spark had died he turned on a faucet, and the light ashes were swept down the waste pipe. He rubbed a speck of grime from his hands and opened the box office door. Oswald sat on a high stool beside the window.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

### Conclusive Evidence.

Irvin Cobb, writer, and father of a daughter whose cleverness is mentioned by Arnold Bennett in his book on "Your United States," lives in Yonkers, which is near New York. Recently, a family moved into the house next door, and within a week little Miss Cobb had drifted in to see them. Casually, she proceeded to tell the lady of the family much about herself, her father, what she did, and a deal of domestic history.

"My father says that you must be nice people, too," said she, in conclusion.

"That's nice," was the pleased response. "And what made him think that, since he has never seen us?"

"Oh, he says you have such nice garbage!" answered the young fellow. —National Sunday Magazine.