

The Lapse of Enoch Wentworth

By ISABEL GORDON CURTIS

Author of "The Woman From Welvertons," "The Congress Woman," Etc.

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Into a fairly decent career there comes occasionally a moral lesson. Temptation comes, and the man, heretofore honorable and honest, falls as though his backbone were of gristle.

CHAPTER I.

The game ended with a consolation pot. Merry and Wentworth, each with his last chip in the middle of the table, called for a show-down. All but Singleton dropped out, and he, the big winner of the evening, took the pot. Wentworth and Merry were broke.

The game had been played in Wentworth's library. Before its close the gray light of the morning began to steal past the curtains and the glow of each electric lamp took on a murky base. Enoch Wentworth, acting as banker, cashed in the chips of the winners. Three of the men put on their hats, said "Good morning," and went out. Andrew Merry sat beside the baize-covered table with its litter of chips, pulling slowly at a cigar and staring into vacancy.

"Do you mind if I open this window?" asked Wentworth. "There's a chill in the air outdoors that will feel good. I've swallowed so much smoke my throat feels raw."

"Open every window in the room if you like, old man. I'm going home."

"Hold on a minute," cried Wentworth unexpectedly. "I'll go you just one more hand. Let's play one big stake and then swear off forever."

"I tell you, Enoch, I haven't a cent. Heaven knows how I can tide over these months until the season opens. It's a good thing I'm not a married man." Merry laughed mirthlessly.

"One last hand!" pleaded Wentworth.

"What do you want to play for?" Merry turned up a coat sleeve and stared at his cuff buttons thoughtfully. "I have nothing left but these. I don't think I'll put them up."

"We've thrown away enough money and collateral tonight," Wentworth replied. "Let's make this stake something unique—sentimental, not financial. Why not make it your future against mine?"

"That's a great stake! Sha'n't I throw in my past!"

"No, let each of us play for the other's future. It is a mere fancy of mine, but it appeals to me."

"Are you serious? What in God's name would you do with my future if you won it—what should I do with yours?"

"I tell you, it's a mere fancy of mine."

"All right. Carry out your fancy, if it amuses you. I ought to be willing to stake my life against yours on any hand, if you say so."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, if you want to call me."

Andrew Merry smiled and blew a furry of smoke rings into the marble face of the Shakespeare, while he watched Wentworth's pen hurry across a sheet of paper. The newspaper man handed it to him with the ink still wet.

"There," he said, "we'll play for that document, the winner's name to be written at the top, the loser to write his name at the bottom."

Andrew Merry read it aloud:

To
I hereby pledge myself until death—to do your every bidding—to obey your every demand—to the extent of my physical and mental ability—to furnish me with support.

"Will that hold good in law?"

"Just so long as the loser is a man of honor—no longer. Are you going to weaken?"

"I'll be damned if I am. I'll put this bit of paper in my scrapbook."

"The man who wins, keeps that bit of paper," Wentworth answered with a whimsical smile.

He tossed the unsigned bond into the center of the table and shuffled the cards with grave deliberation. Merry lit a fresh cigar and puffed it meditatively. Upon each listless brain began to dawn the realization that this was a stake of greater import than the rolls of bills which had grown lighter and lighter till the last greenback vanished.

"Who'll deal?" asked Wentworth.

"We'll cut," Merry spoke quietly.

"Low deals, ace low."

Enoch Wentworth cut a tray, Merry a seven spot. Wentworth shuffled the cards again and held them out to his opponent.

"Does one hand decide it?"

"Yes, one hand. Each man to discard, draw, and show down."

Wentworth dealt with noticeable deliberation. They picked up their hands.

"Give me four cards," said Merry.

"I'll take three." Wentworth's face was as solemn as his voice.

For a moment each man sat staring at his hand. Then Merry spoke.

"There's no use in showing down," he said. "I haven't even one little pair."

"Hold on," expostulated Wentworth, scarcely concealing the relief which his friend's admission gave him. "I'm only ace high. Does that beat you?"

Merry's face also told its story of reaction. "Same here," he said, laying the card on the table face up, "and a jolly king to follow it."

"King for me, too." Wentworth's face flushed and his voice grew impatient. "What's your next card?"

"A ten." Merry replied tranquilly,

too tense to wonder why Enoch awaited his declaration.

"Ten here. My God! are they all alike?"

"Seven next."

"And mine's a seven!"

Both men paused, each with his eyes on the other's card.

"And a four," cried Wentworth irritably. He passed his hand across his forehead; it was moist and cold.

"You win." When Merry tossed down his hand a tray turned over—it was the same tray which gave Wentworth the deal.

Wentworth had drawn to an ace and ten. Merry held up a king. The younger man lifted a pen, dipped it in the ink, and scrawled Enoch Wentworth across the slip of paper. At the bottom he wrote with grave deliberation, Andrew Merry, and handed the paper to Wentworth. The newspaper man stared at it for a moment, then dropped it on the table, laid his cheek on the palm of his hand, and looking straight in the face of the actor, asked: "Merry, do you realize what this means?"

"Not yet, perhaps; still I wish you more luck of my life than I've had."

"Why?"

"The Lord knows. One manager died, another went under. It's the uncertainty of stage life."

"And his mother?" asked Dorcas.

"She died suddenly last season. A fool usher gave Merry the telegram in the middle of a performance, when he went off the stage. He dropped as if he'd been shot. They rang down the curtain until the understudy could get into his tugs. He didn't act for two months. I thought he would never brace up. I had him here half the winter trying to cheer him. He gave me the dumps."

"Poor fellow," cried Dorcas.

"I roused him through his pride. He hadn't a cent to his name, so I shamed him into going back to work. He earns lots of money, but it gets away from him."

Wentworth's gaze turned to the litter of chips on the table. His sister's eyes followed.

"Is it that?" she asked.

"Partly."

The girl rose to her feet. She put her hands on her brother's shoulders and gazed down into his face.

"Enoch," she said hesitatingly, "I wish you wouldn't. You could help your friend if you would turn over a new leaf yourself."

"We both swore off tonight for good and all, little girl." Wentworth took her hands between his own and looked into her eyes with a resolute look. "I want you to help both of us—Merry and me. The evil of the world was never whispered inside convent walls. You've left a quiet, simple life—for a very different world. There's more mission work waiting you right here than if you had taken the veil."

"Enoch," the girl's face was grave and earnest, "Enoch, nothing would ever make me take the veil. I have only one ambition—I want to go on the stage."

"Good Lord!" cried Wentworth, "I never dreamed of such a future—for you."

"You don't know stage life as I do," he continued seriously. "There are women—and men for that matter—who go into the profession clean skinned, clean souled. They spend their lives in it and come out clean; but there are experiences they never forget."

"Is life as bad as that?" the girl asked simply.

"Life is as bad," her brother answered slowly, "and yet I would as willingly see you go on the stage as into society—I mean fashionable society, as I know it here in New York. A newspaper man sees the under side of life."

"It would not hurt me." The girl tossed back a heavy braid of hair which fell over her shoulder, and knelt at Wentworth's knee.

"I have you always to turn to, big brother," she whispered. She laid her cheek fondly against his hand. "Don't you remember that used to be the only name I had for you? You were so big, so strong, so wise and so—old. I used to sit on the gatepost, waiting for you to come home. Don't you remember our Saturday tramps, how we used to play 'I spy' in the orchard, and went bird-nesting, picnicking and fishing, or playing Indian camp on the island?"

Enoch clasped her hands tightly. "I remember, little Dorcy. They were the happiest days in my life."

"Let us get out of the city," cried the girl. Their eyes turned to the sunlit square below. The morning rush of New York life had begun, with its clang of bells and thunder of vehicles.

"Dorcas, I'm off to bed. I haven't shut an eye for 24 hours."

CHAPTER II.

The Measure of a Man.

A week later Wentworth and his sister left town for a vacation. They had discovered an old-fashioned farmhouse on a quiet stretch of shore, and settled down contentedly to a simple, outdoor life. One morning a telegram broke their solitude.

"I have half an hour to catch a train to the city," said Enoch, as he tumbled out of a hammock. "You may drive me to the depot if you wish, Dorcas."

"You're not called back to that hot office," she cried wistfully, "after a vacation of only three days?"

"It isn't the paper, Dorcas; it's Merry. Get into the buggy; I'll tell you about it on our way to the station. You may drive." He leaned back comfortably in the wide seat. "You like driving, I don't."

"What's the matter with Mr. Merry?" Dorcas asked. "Is he ill?"

when I came to New York. I found his name in the cast of a light opera company on Broadway. He was pretty far down the list, but before the thing had run two weeks he was moved up to second place. His work was unusual. He's the funniest Merry Andrew I ever saw, yet once in a while there's a touch of whimsical, tearful pathos in his antics that makes a man—wink."

"Take me to see him," cried the girl eagerly.

"We'll go tomorrow. It's his closing night in 'The King at Large.' He's a bigger favorite than several of the big stars, yet—it's the queerest thing—in all these years he's never taken the step that would bring him to the top."

"Why?"

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CHAPTER III.

Cassiopea's Chair.

Dorcas Wentworth stopped on the crest of a cliff and looked down. A few feet below her, on a ledge like a wide shelf, Merry lay watching the waves as they broke against the jagged walls of a narrow cove.

"Day-dreaming, Mr. Merry?" cried the girl.

He sprang to his feet. "Why, I never heard you. Do you wear velvet shoes? Let me help you down." He began to climb the uneven steps.

"The idea of helping me down, after I have made my way alone over these chasms!" She pointed to the wall behind her. Then resting one hand on his shoulder, she leaped past him lightly.

"What a heavenly retreat!"

"Yes," answered Merry, dreamily. "I found it several days ago. I've called it Cassiopea's Chair."

"Who was Cassiopea?"

"I've forgotten. Some satellite creature, I believe. Her name has a restful sound, and this place is restful and lonely."

The girl laughed. "Were you day-dreaming?"

"I suppose so. I was watching these waves. Most of them break without a splash; then once in a while, away out as far as your eye can reach, you see one roll up, gathering force from you can't imagine where, and it comes on tempestuously through a calm sea, to crash against the cliffs. Sometimes it throws its spray up here." He pointed to a wet line on the rock just below them. "Then again, one which promises to be a ripper amounts to nothing when it breaks."

"Yes it is fascinating," she agreed. "Yesterday I spent an hour watching them. It makes me think of people."

"What people?" he demanded, not understanding.

"All sorts. People who never do anything, who saunter through life and are the failures, and the few who live after their work is done."

"Merry," in her intensity the girl addressed him as her brother did, "they make me think of you. You could make a towering big wave of your life. You don't!"

The man turned quickly and looked into her eyes with flushed face. He did not speak.

"I wish—oh, I do wish"—Dorcas' voice was like that of an ardent child. "I wish I could rouse you to make the best of yourself. There is so much you could do!"

"Do you really think so?"

"No, I don't think it. I know it. You are two people; one is lazy and indifferent, with just ambition enough to do the work you have to do. You can't help doing it well—you could not do it badly. Then there is the other—a man with vivid imagination, feeling, emotion, and ability; but it is so hard to wake him up!"

Merry jumped to his feet and stared down into the girl's face. "How did you learn this—about me? Has Enoch laid my soul bare to you?"

"Enoch told me something of your career, that was all. I know you better than he does."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Only One.

She (gazing at the view)—What a magnificent scene!

He (an auto fender)—You mean that limousine?

Vast Continent of Asia.

Asia, which is the largest of the continents, has an estimated area of 17,057,646 square miles.

"Not that, but he's in danger of killing his career. He's going up the state to a little one-horse town to play leading roles in a ten, twenty, thirty stock company."

"Why does he do that?"

"I guess he's broke. I can't tell until I see him. I'll be back tonight, or tomorrow at the latest. I'll wire you what train. You'll meet me, won't you?"

"Of course," she promised.

Next morning the two men stood on the platform of the smoker on a shore accommodation train, which sauntered from one small station to the next, skirting the water for miles.

Andrew Merry tossed a half-smoked cigar into a swamp beside the track where the thin, green blades of cattails were whipped by the breeze.

"I don't believe I want to mix odors this morning," he said.

"It is great ozone," Wentworth lifted his hat to let the wind cool his head. "There's the little station now! I'll bet that speck of white is Dorcas!"

"How queer that I've never met your sister," Merry suggested. "Is she grown up?"

Wentworth laughed. "Almost," he admitted. "You did see her once."

Merry followed Wentworth as the train stopped. In a half-dozen fashion he shook hands with a tall young woman in a white linen gown. Was this the child—long limbed, gawky and shy—he had imagined he might meet? Somewhere back in his mind lay an impression that Enoch had referred to his sister as a young colt. The thought was so absurd that he smiled; any coltish awkwardness must have disappeared with short frocks! Merry stared at the girl with bewildered admiration, wondering now why he had never felt the mildest curiosity about Wentworth's sister. He became conscious that he was making a mental analysis; she had black-fringed gray eyes; warmth and dancing blood glowed in her face, for she had the coloring of a Jack rose; a mass of auburn hair was coiled in a loose knot at the back of her head; she wore no hat; a band of dull-blue velvet was tied about her head and fell in a loose bow over her ear, but strands of hair, which glowed like copper in the sunshine, had escaped and blew about her face; she had the tender mouth of a child. In the straightforward eyes was sweet womanliness, gentle determination, and a lack of feminine vanity which Merry had seldom seen in the face of a beautiful woman. He even forgot to drop her hand while he gazed into her face, half admiringly, half perplexedly.

"I've brought Mr. Merry down to stay with us till we go home," Wentworth announced.

"I'm delighted," cried Dorcas cordially.

Next morning after breakfast Enoch and his sister rowed out to deep water with their fishing outfit. Merry still was in bed; he was tired, he pleaded, and could not immediately acquire the habit of early rising.

"What do you think of Andrew?" asked Wentworth abruptly. He lifted his head after the task of baiting a hook and looked into his sister's face.

"I think he ought to be waked up."

"To join our fishing trip?"

"I mean waked in his ambitions. He seems to me like a man who has no goal in sight. He needs something to

work for. He spoke last night of one ambition he has—"

"Sort of moonlight confidences?" queried her brother.

"No—not that. He's determined to jump straight into a part that will wring the heart out of his listeners."

"That's foolish. The public wants just so much versatility. You can't kill off a beloved comedian to resurrect a new emotional actor, no matter how good he may be. People won't stand for it."

"He isn't satisfied." The girl pulled up her line and tossed away a morsel of nibbled bait, covering the hook with a fresh clam.

"Some greedy fish had a square meal off your bait and never got the hook in his gullet. He'll come back for more, then get caught. It's the same way with human beings."

"Philosopher!" laughed Dorcas. She



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Girl Had Idea That Introduction to Distinguished Englishman With Peculiar Name Was a Joke.

Colonel Younghusband, hero of the British expedition to Lhasa, and the first white man who ever entered Tibet's sacred city, is rather embarrassed at times because of his unusual name. "The trouble is," he said the other day, "that frivolous young people refuse to take your name seriously. At that, I think I have the advantage over Lord Sandwich, whose name also seems to be a subject for jest. While in Washington once Lord Sandwich attended a reception at the British embassy. He was introduced to an American girl, who labored under the delusion that the introduction was a joke. But she was not to be taken in. 'Lord Sandwich!' she exclaimed, 'I'm delighted to meet you. I suppose Lord Spongecake or Lord Pie will be here next!'"

When Confidence Returned.

The young bride was exchanging costume for a traveling suit.

"Inez," she asked of the rather envious housemaid who was assisting her, "did I appear at all nervous at any time during the ceremony?"

"Just a little at first," replied Inez, "but not after Gerald had said 'I do.'"

—Ladies' Home Journal.

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