

The LAPSE of ENOCH WENTWORTH

By ISABEL GORDON CURTIS
Author of "The Woman from Wolverton"
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CHAPTER XXIV—Continued.

"Why," she cried suddenly, "the date was May 29, last year; that was two days after I came home from the convent." Her forehead knitted into a puzzled frown. "It must have been that night—that morning—when Enoch had a stag party, and I came in, after you had all gone. It was the first time I saw you. I have told you about it—when you sat out there, waiting for a 'bus'."

"Yes," he whispered.

"Then afterwards," she raised her head with a quick gesture, "we went to Juniper Point. There you told me about your play—and you went away to write it."

She paused, waiting for Merry to answer. She did not raise her eyes. Her head was bent as if she took the shame of her brother upon her own shoulders.

"Yes," the man spoke in a slow whisper.

"Then you came back, with the play finished, and read it to Enoch, and he—he claimed it—because he held this against you?" She laid a trembling finger upon the sheet of paper.

"Yes."

Dorcas sat perfectly still with her arms lying on the desk. Merry bent over and gently touched her cheek.

"Oh!" she shrank away from him with a shuddering cry. "Oh, how could you let him do such a thing! It was so cruel, so inconceivably cruel, so shameful, and so unjust! It was such a mistake! Why did you let my brother do such a thing?"

"I don't know," Merry spoke abruptly.

"Tell me why you let him do it," persisted the girl.

"I don't believe I can explain—to you." There was a hopeless tone in the man's voice. "For a while it seemed to me like a poker debt. Women cannot understand a poker debt."

"No, I cannot understand," confessed Dorcas. Then she went on hurriedly: "Was that your only reason?"

"No, I felt that way at first. Then—it seemed foolish. One night I determined for a minute to set myself free, to get the play back, and to make you understand. It was the night—that night—when you took me home—when you found me in the—when you gave me new courage and a fresh outlook on life—when you made a man of me."

Dorcas rose and stood facing him with her eyes searching him. "Why didn't you do it?" she asked.

"Because," said Merry unsteadily, "do you remember you—no I—I—asked you—when a man had fallen as low as I had if he had anything left that would pull him to his feet. You said, 'Yes, so long as he has honor, there is no end of a chance for him.'"

"Oh!" cried Dorcas aghast. "Oh, to think that I should have put that in your way!"

"Put what in my way? Dearest, that night I came around the corner—I had been wandering in the desert. Suddenly I found sunshine, I found love and hope, I found you. That night—when you went away—I began to understand that it was the most wonderful chance God ever put in a man's way."

An instant later his arms were about her and she felt his kiss upon her cheek.

"Don't," cried Dorcas. "Don't!" She freed herself from his clasp and held him away from her. "Can't you understand, don't you see, Andrew, after what Enoch did to you, that I cannot be your wife?"

"You cannot be—my— He stared at her in bewildered dismay.

"Yes, that is what I mean," she whispered tremulously. "Don't you understand? How could I marry you with the thought of this horrible wrong constantly between us? I could never forget it. Remember it was Enoch, my brother—don't you understand?—my brother—who did this! How could you go on loving me and—"

"Remember—it was your brother who saved my life," said Merry passionately. "How could I go on loving you, dearest? How could I stop loving you? I could go through hell for you, and yet I confess I would rather be with you in heaven." He flushed and his face grew grave. "You are mine—all mine—and I am yours, so wholly and truly yours that I have grown to think of this world as merely one spot—one little spot—where we can make a home and I can have you beside me—for the rest of my life."

CHAPTER XXV.

In the Daylight.

Wentworth's chamber was dim as twilight when Merry entered. The outer world lay white and breathless under a dazzling sun, and the sudden change to a darkened sickroom for a moment made Andrew grope vaguely on the threshold. As his eyes became accustomed to the dusk he saw a white-gowned nurse standing beside the bed. Under the sheet lay the motionless outline of the man's long body, the head wound with snowy bandages. Merry's hands gripped to-

gether convulsively. The nails cut into his palms and an ache which hurt tugged at his heart. Wentworth's chamber held memories for him: he thought of nights when he had lain helpless upon that same bed and Enoch had taken care of him in a lumbering fashion. During those days he had seen the rugged face grow warm from want of sleep; still for him a smile always lit the stern features.

Suddenly, as the last remnant of an old scab sloughed off, every fragment of hatred, of resentment at injustice, of pain and rebellion which for ten months had been warping his nature and clouding his life fell away from Merry's heart. The love, the implicit confidence, even the boyish dependence upon the older man, came flooding back into his soul like a high tide. All that had stood between him and Wentworth seemed unimportant compared with the vital fact that they had been and still were friends.

When the nurse beckoned he stole noiselessly across the floor. She pointed to a chair by the bedside. "He has dozed off," she explained in a low whisper. "He asked for you just before he went to sleep. I told him you were coming. Sit here so that he can see you when he wakes up."

Merry dropped into the chair. He began to see perfectly through the gloom. Wentworth's grim, gaunt face had startled him for a minute. The eyelids were closed, with depths of shadow below them. The man's dominating nose stood out like a silhouette against the white pillow. The mustache had been shaved away and lines, chiseled by days and nights of pain, wrinkled about the quiet mouth. Merry sat staring at the haggard face with a dull, tugging hope in his soul, which he could not voice even to Dorcas.

He wanted time—time enough to tell Enoch that the old enemy was dead, that the old love was alive, strengthened by new ties. A spasm of pain ran through the sick man's face, wrinkling the pallid forehead and twitching the lips. Merry looked up at the nurse. She read the question in his eyes.

"No," she whispered, "he is going to live. His brain is clear now. He has a great constitution. That was the only thing that saved him."

The woman had a strong, intelligent face and her manner was full of calm conviction. She was not young and must have watched over many a battle between life and death. She knew! Merry sighed with relief and peace of mind, even with a mad throbbing joy. The thought of Dorcas and the future came with the conviction that there was still time to take up the old bonds of love and to begin life again.

The face upon the pillow moved and Enoch's eyes opened slowly. Recognition flashed into them, then a smile crept about the lined mouth.

"Enoch!" The young man dropped on his knees beside the bed, his fingers stole under the sheet and caught in a strong grasp the hand which he

occasionally during Enoch's convalescence Dorcas found him listening to common noises about the house with a feverish anxiety which was half-terror.

"I don't know what he wants," said the nurse one day. "I wish I could find out. The doctor orders me not to bring up any subject that might disturb him. There's something on his mind, something that harasses him. Yesterday I stood on the stair speaking to Mrs. Volk and I left him asleep. When I went back he was leaning on his elbow and his eyes were fixed on the door as if he dreaded seeing some one come in. He asked who the woman was I had been talking to. His temperature had gone up. I wish I knew what he is worrying about."

"I think I understand," said Dorcas. She returned to the sickroom carrying a bit of needlework. An eager smile came into her brother's eyes when she opened the door. He lay propped up with pillows. She sat down beside his bed. "Shall I read?" she asked.

"No; go on with your sewing. I like to see your hands fly with that bright silk between your fingers. Men have an idea that women are one-sided creatures. They are mistaken. You sew beautifully, and yet, while you stitch, I think of your 'Cordella.'"

"You haven't cared for her about business, Enoch. There are some things you may want to know, since you are strong again. Mr. Oswald sailed for England a fortnight ago. He hated to go, leaving you before the critical point was passed, but the Strand Theater offered open time for August and it had to be attended to. He is rehearsing an English company now for 'The House.'"

"Didn't he want you for it?" asked Wentworth.

"Yes; but I should not have gone even if you had been well. He has given 'Cordella' to Miss Embury, an English girl. He says she will play it beautifully. We are to open here on the twentieth of October. The whole company has been re-engaged. Mr. Oswald said he did not believe you would care to make any changes. There is only one new member—Helen Capron will play 'Mrs. Esterbrook.' Miss Paget went to London three weeks ago."

Dorcas did not raise her eyes while she spoke. The silk thread had knotted and she sat disentangling it with her needle.

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Enoch stared out at the window. "Who is 'we'?" he questioned.

A wave of scarlet crept across the girl's face.

"Andrew Merry has offered to help care for you until you are quite strong again," she answered without raising her eyes.

There still were gray shadows in his face and his hollows and wrinkles about his mouth. His hair had whitened at the temples. Physically the man had changed, but a new tranquility had begun to smooth away

lines of worry and care in the colorless face.

"And begin life over again?" he asked.

"Yes," said the girl gently.

A pathetic eagerness came into his face; then it grew still with the gravity of a man who had almost touched hands with death. Into the wrinkles about his mouth crept the old dogged determination, tempered by a humility which Dorcas had never seen before. She flung her work aside, dropped on her knees, and drew her brother's face close against her own.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

A Moral Lesson.

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"This isn't business." Enoch's face grew peremptory. "I'm strong enough for this. I'm not a praying man, Andrew, but I lay in the dark last night thinking God that he had let me live long enough to—make restitution. I can't make full restitution. It seems to me as if I had been living on the brink of hell for half a lifetime. Let me come back," he pleaded, "back—so I can look decent people in the face again."

Merry did not speak. He sat watching Enoch's wasted fingers search through a mass of papers in the little drawer. He lifted out a bankbook and a yellow envelope, then he set the drawer aside and laid the leather covered booklet upon Merry's knee.

"That is yours," he explained. "You will find there every cent of royalties from 'The House.' It was banked apart from my private account. It grew amazingly during the spring. You are a wealthy man."

Andrew opened it and glanced through the pages. He looked bewildered for a moment.

"Jebu! What can I do with so much money? I swear, Enoch, I don't care a penny for being a wealthy man except—"

Wentworth did not answer. He was staring at a slip of paper he had drawn from the yellow envelope. "You remember this, Andrew?" he asked abruptly.

Merry nodded. He caught a glimpse of Wentworth's name and his own upon the flimsy thing they had called the bond. Enoch leaned back against the pillow and began to destroy the paper with slow deliberation, tearing it across and across until it was reduced to a heap of flakes which fluttered down into the hollow of his gaunt palm. He shook them into the envelope and handed it to Merry, who took it without a word and slipped it between the leaves of the bankbook.

"If you can trust me, Boy, until the right time comes and I reach the right place, I will make full restitution before the world."

"Don't, old man, let us bury this now and forever. Good God! isn't it restitution enough to have saved my life?"

"No," Enoch spoke with swift passion, "no, it isn't restitution. Don't stand in my way. You have to humor sick men, you know. Besides, I want to lay my soul bare to you now, Andrew. Had I been a Catholic I should have done it to a priest long ago, I suppose."

"Go ahead, Enoch, I'll listen," he said gently.

Wentworth turned in bed and clasped his hands around one bent knee. "Years ago," he began brusquely, "I was wandering about in the Tennessee mountains on an assignment when I fell in with a chap who taught psychology in Yale. He was nothing wonderful, but his science was fascinating. Time and again, since those days, I have planned, if I could find the leisure, to go into psychology and study the thing out. Still, any man who knocks about the world as I have done learns to puzzle things out for himself. There must be something alluring, though, to be able to reduce the promptings of one's own soul to a science and then to work out a problem in yourself. Don't you think so?"

"I should imagine so. Still, it's an unopened book to me," Merry admitted.

"We used to sit and talk every night around the campfire. I remember once this young MacGregor explained to me why a man we had both known committed murder. He killed his wife first, then, horror-stricken, shot himself. It's a common enough story, you read it in the papers every day of the week, but it came close to us because we had both known the fellow well. He was a decent, quiet, cheerful citizen, with a genial, kindly way about him. His taking off seemed a mystery. None of us had even seen him angry. Suddenly he turned into a flaming fiend, a murderer, and a suicide. Nothing but insanity or the Yale man's theory explained it."

"What was his theory?"

Wentworth paused for a minute with a haunted look in his eyes. "He claims that the morals of every human being are molded during the first twenty years of his life. Into a fairly decent career there comes occasionally—for the life of me I can't remember his technical name for it—I should call it a moral lesion. Some sin which a man has committed, and you might say lived down, before he was twenty, crops out again years after and it conquers him. Each time he may repent and turn over a new leaf. The world looks on him not as an Admirable Crichton perhaps, but as a tolerably good fellow. Then suddenly, without the ghost of a warning, even after he imagines he has outgrown the tendency to that particular sin, there comes a temptation, and he goes under as if his backbone were gristle. He falls as quick as that!"

Wentworth paused for a moment and snapped his fingers. "Curious, isn't it?" he added.

"It certainly is curious," agreed Merry.

"When the career of this murderer was brought to the light of day, they found that once when he was a schoolboy, and again, when a friend stole his sweetheart, he might have committed murder if a weapon had been at hand. The third time a gun lay close to his elbow."

Andrew Merry did not speak, but sat watching Enoch with bewilderment in his eyes.

"I am going to tell you about two lesions which occurred in my own life. There was a third—you know about that one yourself."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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